

Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

Vol. 2

DESTINY

Rieko Yoshihara



Yaoi



Novel

Ai No Kusabi *The Space Between*

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DESTINY

Written by
RIEKO YOSHIHARA

Illustrations by
KATSUMI MICHIHARA

English translation by
Kelly Quine

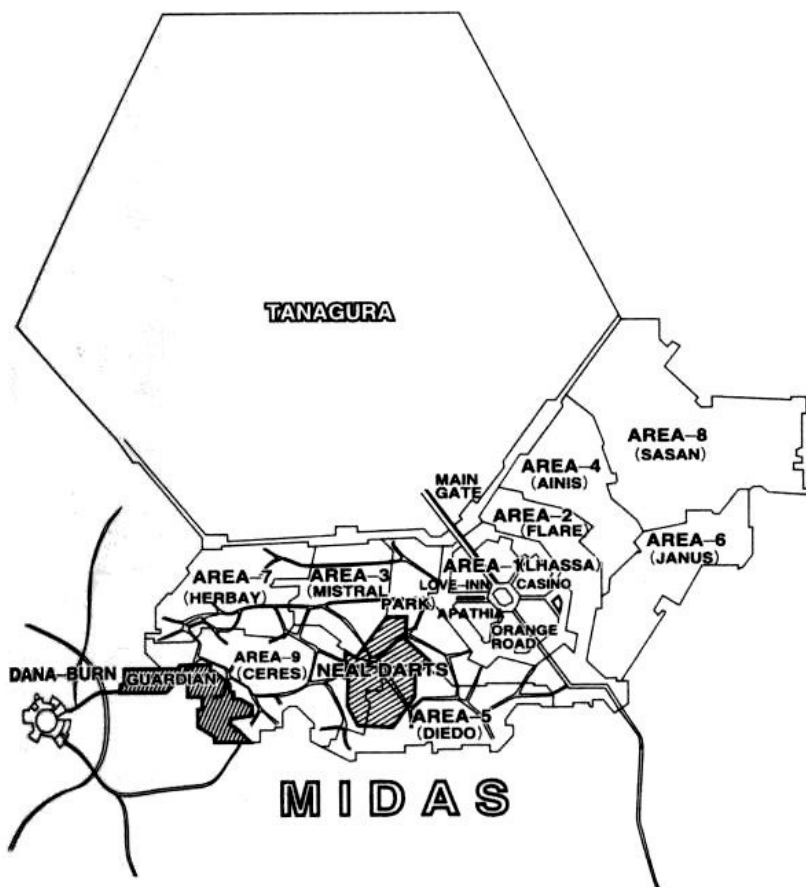


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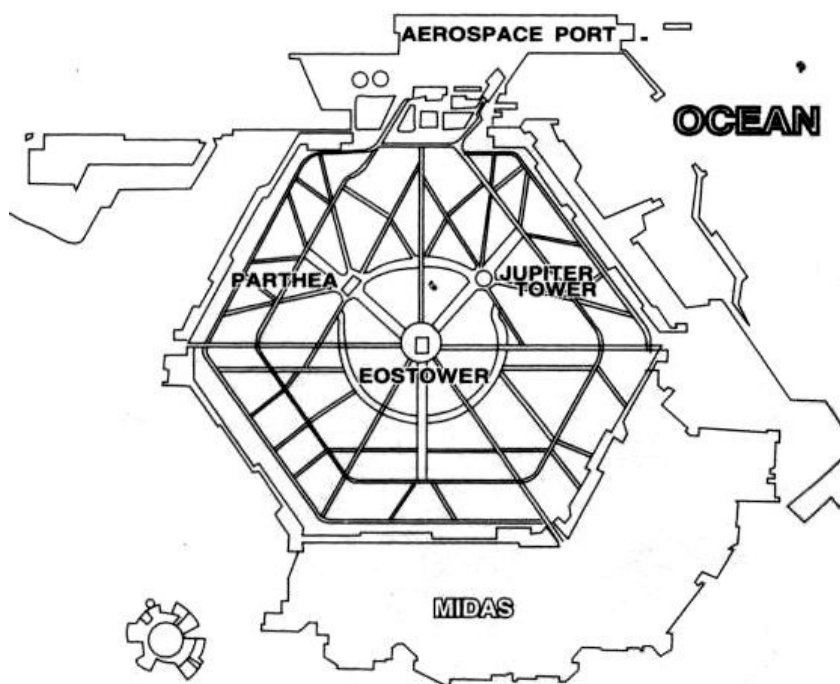
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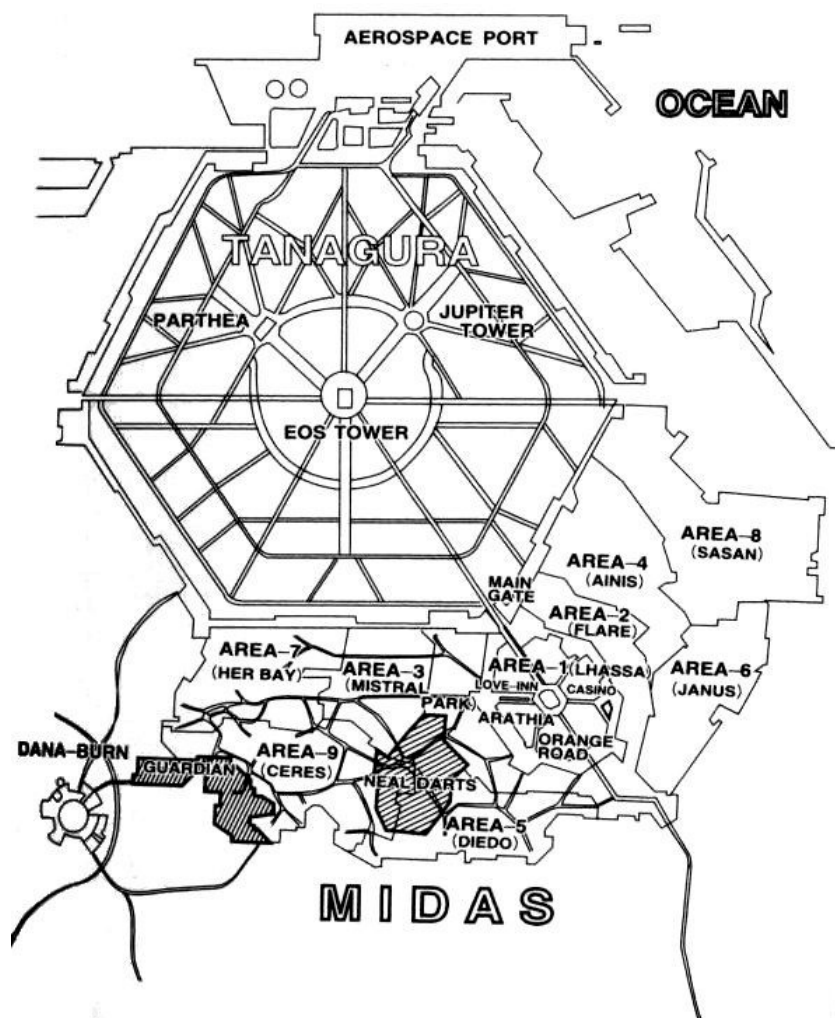
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TANAGURA





Preface

Why the long face?

Being called slum trash really bothers you that much? I guess it must, from the evil eye you're giving me. The Market's got its own way of saying hello, you know.

Being a mongrel from Ceres makes you the worst of the lot, but you don't need me to tell you that. If you've got the time to get pissed off about it, then you've got the time to get used to it.

Making it this far on guts and luck alone doesn't mean the Market will cut you any slack. That's why you've got to prick up your ears and keep your eyes open, no matter what happens.

Your mouth, though, you keep that shut tight. That's what it takes to rise in this world. You get it now?

(Excerpt from the *Ai no Kusabi* "Ambivalence" image album, Katze's narration.)

Chapter 1

Throughout time and space, regardless of age, sex, and race, the meeting of two people has always proved a thrilling and dramatic gamble: whether by design or purely by accident, or because Lady Luck happened to be in a whimsical mood that night.

In the moment they encounter one another, the gods may warmly smile or coldly turn their backs and walk away.

They strike it rich.

Or they strike out.

Snake eyes or sevens, it's a brand new game with every throw of the dice, victory or disaster determined by the turn of a single die.

But there is more than one path to the future and a myriad of choices to make with every step. What decision, which direction will be the right one? No hard and fast rules give the game away. No theory breaks the bank. Only a firm sense of will and a lack of self-consciousness. Take what's yours, and from that moment onward, regardless of what is hoped for or what is feared, be assured that the target within sight will constantly change.

No one can say what the can happen with two individuals who have just met, but there is the possibility of all the emotions of the human heart—joy, anger, pathos, humor—and every bit of intimacy, of give and take entwined therein. Together they may draw parallel lines that never intersect, or tangled mazes that meander across the countryside.

Youth and adulthood. There are as many ways to describe the boundaries separating those two words as there are people in the world. No one can remain a child forever. That is why, with eyes fixed upon the endpoint of what we call a "life," we negotiate the twists and turns of time, meeting up and breaking up again and again.

... Even if doing so marks the beginning of a fated cause and effect,

of the carnage that ensues, and everything that those words might imply.

A night five years before.

Riki met Iason.

Riki came from the savage world of the slums, warped and distorted by the near-extinction of the female sex. He grew up clawing at an itch he could not scratch, powerless to keep at bay a suffocating sense of stagnation that scalded his soul. The weight of that stark reality coiled about his very being, leaving him night-blind and punch-drunk, incapable of unlocking the door to the truth.

"A slum mongrel has nothing left to lose," he'd come to boast. And that was when it happened.

A night the same as any other, Midas embroiled the heat of its usual bawdiness. Like a voluptuous empress reigning over her kingdom of darkness, she remained the sparkling, eye-dazzling dictator of the night. Her seductive, coquettish voice trilled from every nook and corner, reeling in the ensnared souls, devouring the natural silence of the midnight hours.

Among her attractions was the gaudy, conspicuous, and brilliantly lit arched gate. Leading directly from the fully operational spaceport (built to the specifications of the tourist industry), it was located in Sasan (Area 8) at the eastern reaches of Midas.

The naked nymphs decorating the frieze were derived from the mythic motifs found in the stories of the Veela. Handed down through the traditions of the Salinas Nebula and hearkening back to the legends of Midas, the seductive Veela were considered the apotheoses of Eros and Karma.

So realistic and beautiful were they that they appeared to be more than mere relief sculptures, and so physically alluring as to bewitch a man in his tracks and make him reach out his hand to touch them.

It was they who possessed the divine purity of virgins who knew no sin, and at the same time represented depraved harlots whose sweet poisons would lead a man's heart down to hell.

As if fanning the fires of their seductive enchantments, an oscillating electric rainbow lit up the frieze in a kaleidoscope of colors. The sheer opulence grasped the roots of those desires lurking at the bottom of the human heart and drew them in.

Of course, no one could pass through the gate carrying a gun or knife for personal protection. Though every area made its own arrangements according to its own particular requirements, the primary security checkpoint known as the Midas Gate subsumed the greater metropolis, including the Pleasure Quarters in its entirety.

Within the twin rings of Midas, at its very heart, the streets large and small radiating from Casino Row created long, unbroken spokes of neon light. And everywhere resplendently adorned men and women, young and old alike, collected together with hearty voices and high spirits, like pools of glistening water.

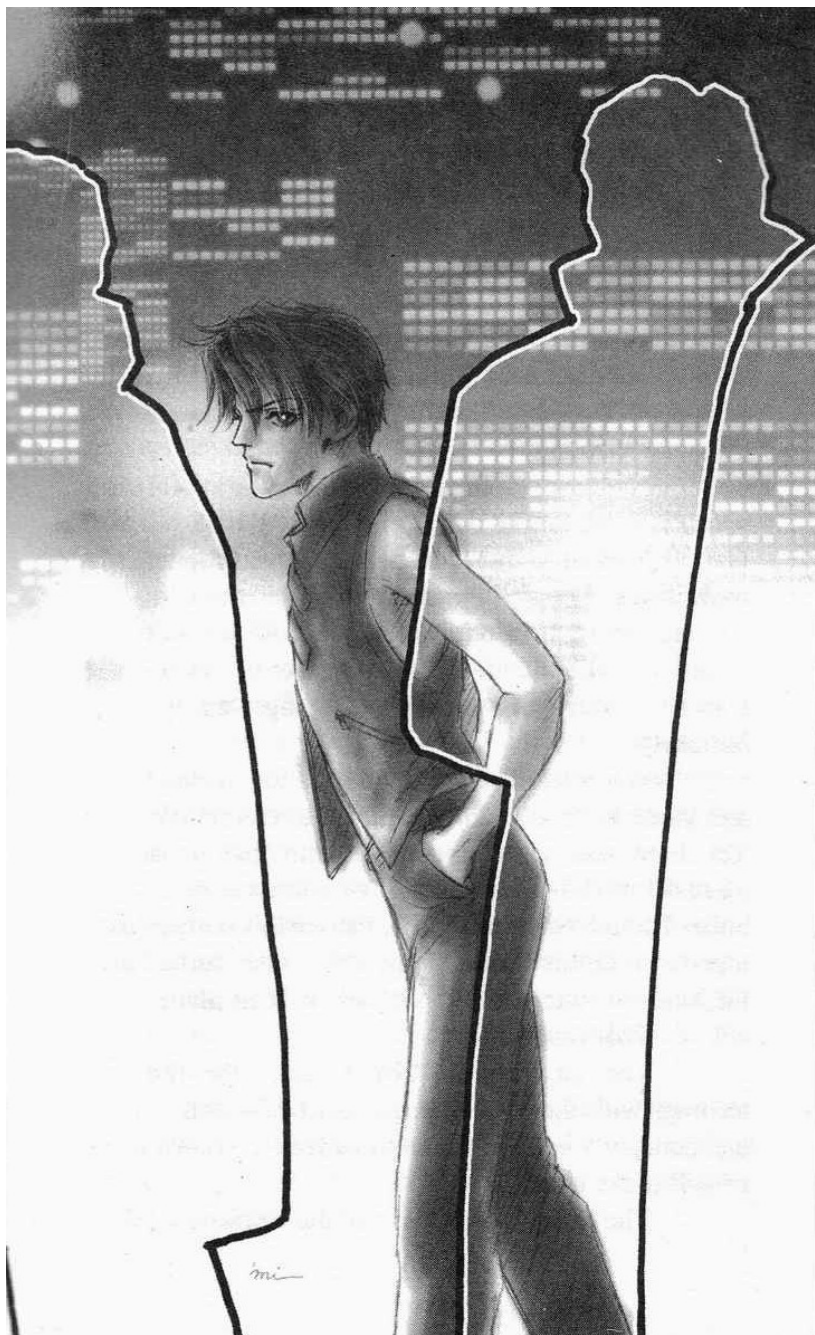
The waves of festive pedestrians were diverse in their own right. The crowds of holidaymakers on excursion tours bumped and jostled their way along with reckless abandon—indifferent to their surroundings and to the rest of humanity, and in a hurry to sate their personal desires.

A young man wove his supple frame through the cresting waves of bodies. Not yet of age, to all eyes and from all perspectives he was as hard and green as an apple in early summer. Nevertheless, his presence aroused in those around him no natural instinct to offer him protection: he appeared to be in need of none.

Far from it, a certain sense of superiority could be observed in the relaxed play of his limbs (so particular to the young), and in the derisive looks he cast at those passers-by so wearing their riches so blatantly.

He did not sport a countenance that might win a stranger over in the course of a chance meeting, but let his face fill that stranger's field of vision, and the youth's piercing visage would stamp the

unique aura of his presence upon the senses.



His dark, insolent eyes spurned intimacy with any other person, shining with a light that belied his years. He alone rose above the fray, throwing the buoyant, aroused mood of the surrounding environs off balance.

His was not a threatening presence that clashed with the environment. Perhaps it'd be better to say that he was on familiar terms with the place, but at odds with everyone else.

Not easily going along with the flow. Not easily brought along for the ride.

Amidst the empty conversations and meaningless hot air jabbered by the untethered tourists and sightseers, he alone walked on with his feet stuck firmly to the ground. His slender frame anchored to a spine of steel, he was a rock amongst the waves of humanity.

Provided there was money, in this world, beauty and youth were available to all, if not eternal life itself. Yet there was something about him that no amount of cash could buy: a strength of charisma bred in the bone. Though slight in stature, the youth's unique luster, together with his limber body, effortlessly turned aside the looks of strangers and put them in their place.

That was Riki.

The pit bull of "Hot Crack," the red zone teeming with the exuberant passions of youth. He was the teenager who held the reins of Bison, known to one and all in the slums.

The citizens of Midas and the residents of Ceres (Area 9) regarded each other as do snakes and scorpions. This, however, was not news to a slum mongrel like Riki, and he was not here strolling the sleepless Midas night on a happy-go-lucky pleasure jaunt.

This was a man with a job to do.

Every night the main thoroughfare proceeding toward Casino Row overflowed with every stripe of person possible. It was amazingly easy to pick out of the human tide the slack-jawed big-spenders from Logos, the nouveau riche from Galaria.

Visitors and sightseers, though, didn't normally walk the streets of Midas with cash in hand. Instead their suit coat pockets and handbags were bulging with plastic. And the plastic would do nicely, as long as he didn't get caught, of course.

Aside from the ceremonial duties of the old-style Mounties, the officers assigned to the Midas Division of Public Safety were anything but ornamental. In particular, the police posted to the Pleasure Quarters—the so-called "Darkmen"—were infamous for their no-nonsense brutality.

The tourists sauntering through the Midas night were not necessarily there with the purest of motives in mind. There were always bound to be troublemakers, sightseers who didn't know when to call it a night. No surprise that where the harmless sheep flocked, the wolves should be drawn also.

Despite all the lily-white publicity campaigns in the world, as long as people existed, the breeding grounds of sin and selfishness would exist. That was the price of being born human.

Neutralizing these predators before they latched onto their victims was the job of the Darkmen. Thus, from the start, the residents of Ceres—the slum mongrels and all their ilk who had been expunged from the official records of Midas—could expect nothing in the way of civil rights or humane treatment.

Nobody had ever run afoul of the Darkmen and still emerged in one piece. Nevertheless, as if playing a deadly game, the slum kids cruised the Midas streets night after night. In any case, the considerable resale value of stolen cash cards on the black market couldn't be ignored.

But it was more than that.

The rush accompanying the enormous risk was a natural occurrence in the daily life of the downtrodden slums. It was an important rite of passage for a kid to prove his worth among his friends.

All the slum kids were reared in the Guardian foster system. Those biologically incapable of giving birth—in other words, the males—

were designated "adults" at the age of thirteen and forcibly emancipated. No matter what manner of life they chose for themselves, they owned their own freedom. Nobody would tell them what to do.

Yet the foreboding sense of claustrophobia and the stench of the open sewer that was the slums closed any door that might have opened to them, all their efforts notwithstanding. They had better odds of getting struck by lightning than winning the lottery in this life.

They didn't have the identity cards that every citizen of Midas possessed. The lack of an identity card was as good as a life sentence.

An odor of indolence and lassitude permeated the territories given to these youngsters, who were "adults" in name only. Just a month breathing the poisonous atmosphere was more than enough to stain the soul. Who *he* was and his reason for being in the slums—a boy had neither the time nor space to sit himself down and take a good hard look at his place in the world.

And distasteful though it might be, he couldn't help noticing that when it came right down to his own survival, it was a lot easier to go with the flow. Nobody called that a cop-out; going along to get along was merely the best way to stay alive in a purgatory that held out no hope of salvation.

The strangling anxiety. The hopelessness buried in denial. The heavy rain of reality coated the slums with its grimy film. As far as Riki was concerned, reduced to its bare minimum, the ethos of the streets could be summed up as follows: *You wipe your own ass.*

No one harbored any desire to end up as the despised mongrel trash of the slums, but at the same time, no one had the means or the willpower to crawl out.

In the slums, a man's "dignity" was worth as much as cheap beer. Any sympathy shown the stranger would be answered in kind by the law of the slums. Cast away what smatterings of personal pride remained and he would be the same old trash. That was the

dilemma.

Riki was still looking for an answer. Because being alive was the only proof of life he knew, he tricked out his antique jet bike and rode it like a man who didn't care if he lived or died. He courted a life of extravagant self-indulgence among his friends. He spent every waking minute expanding his territory...

And prowled the Midas hunting grounds every night.

It all pretty much meant the same thing to him. He lined his prey in his sights and pilfered the plastic. The excitement filling the space between the pulling of his nerves and the measured racing of his heart was nothing like getting wasted on a keg of bootleg stout, which was could never even come close.

Every night in Midas left him burning inside.

As long as he could store up the heat and let it out, he could keep that paradise there in front of his eyes. But get himself worked up just for the hell of it and the fervor he'd lose himself in was more unbearable.

Lady Luck had the hots for him that night and Riki scored time after time until his pockets were stuffed with cash cards.

But still something was lacking.

Why, this night in particular, couldn't he sate himself? It made no sense. He wasn't imagining things. It just wasn't in his head. Even with the buzz he got after doing a few lines, Midas wasn't giving him that rush. It was different from the same old high, a frazzled throbbing in his brain he couldn't do anything about.

Perhaps that's why Guy spoke up. "We'd better head back before our luck runs out." But his warning fell on deaf ears.

"After one more round."

"Riki, it's getting dodgy out there." Guy was sure their winning

streak was about to come to a halt sooner or later.

Riki at least understood that much. The man who didn't know when to quit was in for a world of trouble.

"So let's call it a night then." Guy spoke heavily, like a man beginning to feel the pangs in his gut of one gourmet meal too many. "What if it turns out I'm right?"

"I'm telling you, I'll be fine. I'm not about to screw things up now."

The traffic signal in his head still hadn't turned red. He'll probably be okay, Guy thought. He's made it this far.

An outsider might have treated this supposition as little more than a hunch, but Riki hadn't once played his cards wrong. If he had, then how could a kid not even two years out of Guardian otherwise have brought Hot Crack—the slum's free-fire zone—under his thumb?

And so, Riki handed the reluctant Guy the cards he'd pilfered and they went their separate ways. Of course Riki had no desire to lose his fingers scrambling after that brass ring, but right now the hunger burrowing into his gut was winning. Quitting now and diving into bed with Guy for a celebratory fuck wouldn't cool the fever. The throbbing emptiness inside was crying to be filled in ways he'd never experienced.

Becoming conscious of this, Riki berated himself all over again. It was still there—the constant, choking thirst and sense of irritation that never left him. It'd become all so familiar to him, like a friend who'd long worn out his welcome.

Why were these feelings pestering him so strongly on that particular night? For some reason they were, and so it seemed to him that the best course of action was to run his engines hard into the red and burn them out of him.

He'll do nicely.

The game his eyes fell upon appeared to be the typical tourist: wonder shining in his face, his cheeks flushed with excitement, eyes jumping back and forth as he hurried along. Touched by Midas,

bedazzled by the poisonous air, he was open to attack from any quarter.

They made it so easy. *Don't you get the feeling he's just asking to be made someone's dinner?*

Carefree thoughts quickly condensed into action. Riki fell into step with the target ahead of him, keeping a comfortable distance between them. As always, in his head, he maintained an easy rhythm and measured the time—

He approached the man at a relaxed gait—

And then that moment of elusive, intoxicating joy filling every nook and cranny of his soul—

Suddenly—

From behind somebody grabbed his wrist as if in a vice grip.

Shit! Riki froze on the spot.

What—what the hell—?

His vision went white. A moment of indescribable panic. *No.* He couldn't have. *He couldn't have messed this up!* For the first time ever he tasted real fear.

"Zero points for style. I'm not impressed." An icy cold voice stabbed into his brain, as if it was the very embodiment of that fear.

Shit!

Riki gulped instinctively. His breath filling his throat in spasms. Every hair on his body stood on end. This was bad... very bad. He'd really messed up. Words of self-reproach echoed through his mind. His vision throbbed red. The muscles down his spine stiffened up. He couldn't move.

He just stood there.

As if stricken with hypothermia, the tip of his tongue trembled. He couldn't stop his teeth from chattering.

He couldn't stop shaking.

The pounding of his oddly racing heartbeat held him in some sort of spell. The strength of the fingers digging into his right wrist was a sure sign that Riki was screwed, and there was no escape.

Shit. He ground his back teeth together. This shit was very deep and very serious.

And that wasn't the half of it. Having a damn good idea of what hell the future had in store for him, Riki's attention was drawn inexorably to the incessant pounding at his temples.

Now what?

His heart threatened to jackhammer right through his ribcage. He stared down at his shoes and willed his pulse to slow as he desperately collected his scattered thoughts.

Feign ignorance? Play the jesting fool? He was damned lucky—he didn't have any plastic on him. He still could wriggle out of this. There was no way he was going to yank his arm free, but he had to do something, or he was headed straight to hell.

He taxed every neuron in his brain. *Right now.* What was the best course of action *right now*?

Lost in thought, somebody behind him shouted in a completely different tone of voice. "Hey! What are you doing? Get moving or we'll be late!"

"Who the bloody hell is this?" another voice queried suspiciously. He grabbed Riki's earlobe ruthlessly, spitting derisively, "Hasn't got a PAM. Mongrel, huh?"

Must be from the Midas Vigilante Corps. Riki locked his mouth all the harder shut. Here in Midas, in lieu of an ID card, every citizen had a five millimeter Personal Access Memory (PAM) biochip embedded behind their earlobe. Men wore theirs on the left earlobe, women

on the right.

The devices were color-coded according to age. Each person's unique physical characteristics were recorded down to the DNA. The creation of a system designed to manage the entire populace had also resulted in a system that controlled the behavior of each person with a remarkable precision.

Transit between the areas and movement outside the established territories was prohibited by law. In short, the rigid class system known as "Zein" had become their invisible straitjacket.

Anyone who broke the rules and plotted to escape to the "outside" without permission would be executed on the spot with a custom-designed virus embedded in the PAM device. The police wouldn't bother getting involved until after the fact.

This was no doubt a product of the lessons learned from the Ceres Incident, and an example of the absurdities born into the world because of it. Compared to the hobbled freedoms of the citizens of Midas—their legal status defined by PAM—mongrel trash like Riki and his friends freely indulged in the perverse paradox of strutting through Midas without constraint.

It might seem common sense to identify anyone lacking a PAM as not a citizen of Midas, but a visitor or vacationer. However, though the citizens of Midas more or less dressed alike, in a city where money and image made the man, no matter how favorable the light he was viewed in, Riki was clearly discernable as a mongrel from the town next door and not a tourist on a luxury vacation.

Without a doubt, the slum mongrels saw the Midas Vigilante Corps as their true enemy. When worse came to worst between the Ceres mongrels and the citizens of Midas, they were more dreaded than even the Darkmen. No matter how unconstrained their policing methods, as long as they didn't catch a mongrel in the act, the Darkmen would simply run him out of town.

The Vigilante Corps were different. *These insects coming to Midas to pick at our table scraps must be exterminated once and for all.* With this bit of bigotry as their creed, they had a grotesque and burning

tenacity to engage in a style of street cleaning crudely known as "mongrel hunts." Just for the crime of walking down the street, a mongrel who'd let his identity slip could find himself dragged out of view and beaten to a pulp in a dark alleyway.

Of course, the slum dwellers weren't about to take such unjust treatment lying down, and often gave back as good as they got, kicking up some blood of their own and then racing back to the slums.

Neither the Vigilante Corps nor the police would pursue their quarry across an area borderline, only because of the invisible constraints imposed by their PAM devices. As far as the residents of Ceres were concerned, it was for their own good. *Those bastards step one foot inside Ceres and that'd be the last anybody heard of them. They're petrified by the thought of our delicious slum air getting under their skin and rotting their brains.*

It was spoken with equal parts sarcasm and self-derision. No matter how much the citizens of Midas were said to revile and despise them, there were moments when the stark reality of their lives was thrust in their faces and they had to acknowledge its existence.

Naturally, as far as Riki was concerned, whether the Vigilante Corps or the Darkmen, either one was going to make him regret messing up and getting caught.

"You go on ahead without me."

"It's all the same to me, but—"

"I'll be done here soon enough."

"You shouldn't go eating any odd scrap you pick up off the street."

"I haven't got the time for that."

"Well, that's good to know, but—"

Dismissively, arrogantly, the conversation went back and forth above Riki's head as if he wasn't there. Intense feelings of disgust suddenly overwhelmed him, a violent throbbing behind the eyes

that made him momentarily forget where he was.

He raised his eyes. There in front of him was a luxuriant wave of gorgeous golden hair adorning an equally gorgeous face. As soon as this registered in his brain—

It can't be. A Blondy?

Riki was struck speechless despite himself. He swallowed hard. He'd never had such a close encounter with a Blondy, Tanagura's elite of the elite.

What's a Blondy doing here?

But here he was.

Why would a Blondy show up in a place like this?

And yet he had.

The situation having quickly evolved beyond his ability to fathom the reasons, Riki stood there in stunned silence. The overbearing presence of the statuesque, golden-haired man bespoke a practiced ease at putting others in their place with a simple look. He took in Riki's startled reaction with utter disregard.

No, quite the opposite. The glint in his eyes implied that having this slum mongrel in his line of sight was polluting the view.

"I'll be leaving then."

Riki watched, unblinking as the Blondy turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

Riki deeply exhaled the air stored in his lungs and felt the surrounding eyes drilling into the back of his head. For the first time he truly knew. He felt the multitude of eyes on him and knew this was more than simple bad luck. He'd fucking screwed up. Riki jerkily raised his gaze to the man the Blondy had been chatting with in such an off-hand manner—the man who had Riki's arms pinned behind him.

Are you kidding me? His thoughts trailed off into empty space.

His captor was a good head taller than himself, if not more so. He peered down at Riki from a commanding height. The beauty of his face lacked nothing in comparison to the Blondy who had just left, an aesthetic perfection that words alone were insufficient to describe.

His exceeding attractiveness awakened in Riki an almost instinctual fear. A countenance so flawless, unforgiving, and sagacious that the word "elite" fit him perfectly. There was a touch of callousness—even cruelty—about him that coursed through Riki like an electric shock.

Together with the luxuriant golden hair that symbolized his supreme authority, his was a beauty that all but forced others to bow down before him. For there stood a God of Beauty that maintained about himself an inviolable sense of dignity that defied the ordinary definition of arrogance.

There stood Iason Mink.

"If this is some sort of game you're playing, then you'd best give it a rest. It'll get you into real trouble someday."

The frosty voice stood in stark contrast to the fingers grinding into Riki's wrists. Infused with implications far beyond any mere intent to scold or reprimand, the exceedingly clear, serene, and lucid tone rubbed Riki wrong in every possible way.

"Yeah, well let me the hell go, okay?"

From the wall of spectators immediately came a flurry of criticism and derisive laughter mingled with shock.

"Who is this idiot?"

"What kind of moron doesn't know a Tanagura Blondy when he sees one?"

"Kid's got some balls on him, picking a fight with a Blondy like that."

Ignoring the chatter around him, Riki looked up at Iason, a provocative surge of determination and strong-minded insolence filling his gaze. He spoke to boast of his badness, disgust and defiance filling the depths of his voice: "If you got the time to fucking lecture me, I'd rather be hearing it from the cops."

For the briefest of moments the blue eyes of the otherwise unflappable Blondy narrowed slightly.

Was it the product of his infamous mongrel nature, incapable of kissing civilized ass? Or his unyielding resolve as leader of Bison? Aside from his pride, a slum mongrel had nothing else to lose. Riki knew he shouldn't challenge this guy, shouldn't be the punk kid he was. But he stared him down regardless.

He may well be the lord of whatever, but if Riki yielded to the pressure and averted his eyes he might as well castrate himself. In the slums, such a seemingly trifling concession would be seized upon at once and lose him whatever respect he'd earned forever.

Even if this kind of extreme antagonism had nothing to do with Midas, the filth staining his soul wasn't something easily washed away. Even if his opponent was a Tanagura Blondy, Riki wasn't about to kneel down and lick his boots.

Hollow pride, many would call it. Yet he didn't give a damn about what others thought of him. This one part of his pride was truly nonnegotiable.

And while criticizing the brazen stupidity of baring his teeth to anybody with no regard to who they were, Iason couldn't take this kid lightly, who'd so recklessly bared his teeth and raised his hackles to a Blondy. Far from it, he spoke with a raised eyebrow. "Watch yourself. Don't let it happen again."

With that parting shot he turned and walked away.

"What the hell?" Riki blurted out, overcome by the unexpected sensation that the man was walking away from the challenge. The coldness with which he was being dismissed only riled Riki up even more at once.

Riki stared dumbfounded at Iason's back. Unlike with the Blondy who'd left a few minutes before, a strange humiliation and a hungering thirst burned in his throat. Biting his tongue and watching Iason walk away—clothed in all his cruel indifference—turned the whole incident into a meaningless diversion. It would end up meaning *nothing*.

There had to be a *reason* things had turned out that way... there had to be more to the story than a stroke of good luck. And yet this highfalutin Blondy was graciously telling him to mind his manners and go home.

That being the case, the wisest course would be a quick one-eighty and getting of there before he changed his mind, but that was not what Riki did. That wasn't something he *could* do. Iason's hair was glittering in the dark and disappearing from view. Almost as if fighting against an invisible force, Riki took the first step, pushing himself forward.

After that his feet didn't stop moving. Enraged, Riki plunged into the dark. The only thought in his mind was to keep the figure of Iason in his sights; that he was taking the first step toward his eventual fate, a labyrinth with no exit, a quicksand of longing and frustration and intoxication and shame, could not be known to him.

Riki chased after Iason. He bit down hard on his lower lip, his burning eyes fixed on what was before him. *I'm not getting myself indebted to the likes of some Tanagura elite!* That was the only thought coursing through his mind.

He'd blundered badly, painfully. And he was grateful, relieved to the bottom of his heart, that he hadn't ended up in the arms of the police. But *that* wasn't what occupied any corner of his mind.

One of the Blondy elites that ruled over Tanagura had done a slum mongrel a good deed—no strings attached—and all the worse, as if it was part of a cynical practical joke. But Riki wasn't laughing. His lips only twitched into a grimace.

You wipe your own ass.

Living in the depraved slums, that was Riki's only point of personal pride. And then all at once this act of good will came completely unasked for. In a sense, accepting it at face value was just asking too much of the perverted dog-eat-dog mentality of the slums.

No, even when confined to the cage of Guardian, a world apart from reality, Riki had already tested the limits of his pride and had found this one aspect of himself was the one thing he couldn't surrender. But why? How had such a conviction fixed itself so firmly inside his head?

Riki himself couldn't begin to grasp the reasons. He only knew that he was too young to be dumbly choking down such casual humiliations. And so it must follow for his extraordinary sense of self-respect as well.

Perhaps more importantly, he had no idea what a "Tanagura Blondy" was supposed to mean to a person like himself. There was not the slightest clue in his hot head of the future price he'd have to pay for his current actions, of the regrets he would come to own.

All he could see in front of him was that glimmer of gold. Iason's golden hair might've symbolized a kind of power that Riki couldn't comprehend, but trailing him was a easy. The human ocean parted wherever Iason walked. One and all were captivated by the beauty of his visage.

Stopping momentarily in their tracks, they were entranced as they glanced back over their shoulders. Then, realizing what a famous Tanagura Blondy he was, they caught their breaths once again. The intensity of Iason's being, shrouded in an aura of fierce grace and dignity, was like being in the presence of a god, such that onlookers almost yielded to the inclination to kneel before him.

Within the gaze of the reveling multitude Riki did not let up in the slightest. He reached out and grabbed the Blondy's arm and spoke breathlessly.

"Hey, wait up."

At once a chorus of objections arose, laden with envy and scorn.

"What's with this kid?"

"Who the hell is he?"

"Yeah, who does that brat think he is, talking to a Blondy like that?"

Iason didn't appear perturbed in the slightest by the commotion around him. Neither did he take Riki to task on account of his insolence. He didn't speak. The icy look in his eyes alone—several degrees colder than before—asked, *What?*

Fearlessly Riki snapped right at his face, "What's the deal, letting me off like that?"

Iason's chill, placid tone of voice didn't falter in the slightest "A mere whimsy."

But Iason's attitude did get on Riki's nerves. He frowned in displeasure. The condescending pity, the more than the obvious disdain—it made him sick to his stomach. There was no logic in his reaction. It was the instinctual response of an undisciplined, gangbanging slum kid.

"I don't owe nobody nothing. Especially a big shot elite like you. It's not gonna happen."

"Oh? So finding fault with favors is a hobby of yours?"

Fucking bastard! Unconsciously Riki ground his back teeth in pure fury as he stared back at Iason. *I got something to say to you*, he communicated with a presumptuous sideways jerk of his jaw.

Iason made no verbal reply, but when Riki started to slink off in something of a sulk, unbelievably, and still saying nothing, Iason fell into step beside him. Half out of desperation Riki had propositioned a Tanagura elite and he'd responded.

Is he serious?

Riki had made the offer, and now with the Blondy following, he had to swallow his curses and stiffen his expression. Perhaps—just perhaps—he'd he was going too far, but he just couldn't stop

himself.

The empty space between them swallowed up anything they might want to say.

Chapter 2

Like an ornamental flower blooming in the grimy dark, this unlikely pair of wayfarers were a sight to anyone's eyes.

Not only the aloof and beautiful Blondy filling the air with an unusual ambience of dignity and refinement but even the figure strolling along next to him, a swaggering slum mongrel wearing a mask of insolence and trailing a foul mood behind him.

More than the differences in their physical constitutions, onlookers were stunned into silence by the undeniable disparities in their social stations. They could only gulp and stare.

It's gotta be some sort of joke, right?

The discomfiting emotions they felt would not have been dispelled by any woman in Riki's place, no matter how attractive or talented she might be. Only a Blondy should be seen in the company of another Blondy.

This wasn't the product of resigned cynicism or some kind of darker "understanding" grasped with a wink and nod. This was an expression of the awe and envy they harbored for the Tanagura Blondies, who reigned with the scepters of perfect beauty, perfect knowledge, and perfect power in their grasp.

Hence the obvious and yawning divide between Riki and Iason. More than the distortions of a shimmering mirage, it was rather the ripples generated in the background noise as they walked along that impinged on their senses.

A cruel iceberg glimmering with a golden light. A burning, jet-black rapid. Two states of matter that under normal circumstances should never accommodate each other, let alone strike the faintest chords of sympathetic resonance.

Amidst the herds of pleasure seekers ranging through the Pleasure

Quarters, the two of them alone seemingly flowed against the tide.

They turned down a side street, away from the hustle and bustle of the main thoroughfare. With that change of direction alone the darkness deepened and the passion-laden breezes stagnated. The foot traffic fell by half.

They moved further into the back alleys. The dark valleys winding through the maze of buildings grew deeper and deeper. Riki navigated the familiar alleyway with confident steps.

Not once did he glance back over his shoulder to see if Iason was still behind him. It wasn't because he was sure that Iason was still there. But because—if he dared be honest with himself—comprehending the silent Iason's true intentions taxed his normal abilities, and unlike his usual self, Riki remained unsure of the path ahead.

How do I handle this? Those were the only words clawing at the core of his brain.

Far from clumsy and ill at ease, the extravagant Blondy followed his guide closely. That hardly meant he was going to aimlessly tag after Riki as he cruised the Midas night, but at this point, for whatever reason, neither did he seem to be looking for the opportunity to leave.

Riki had no idea what the truth was, and what he was going to do next. He gritted his teeth as the thought passed through his mind. *Shit*, he said, audibly clucking his tongue. By this point he was finding his emotions hard to control, but he taxed all his neurons in his simmering gray matter just the same.

Yeah, he thought, finally arriving at the answer. *That's the only place that'll do.*

Having set his mind to the task, any hesitancy in his footsteps vanished as well. He proceeded from the back alley to a side street and the Minos Bar. The glow of the fluorescing letters flooded into the depths of the darkness.

Riki paused beneath the neon sign and stared at a drab, dirty door. Behind him, Iason remained silent, while his aura towered over Riki to an almost annoying degree. "*And? What exactly do you intend to do?*" he seemed to be saying.

Figuring that further hesitation would do him no good, Riki shoved the door open. The bar was dark enough that Riki dared not take another step until his eyes had adjusted. Just ahead in the blackness, Riki could make out three lights, yellow to the left, red to the right, and blue in the center.

The center point of light was blue. To the right and left were red and yellow.

Before Iason could say anything, Riki grasped his arm. With searching steps he walked in a straight line toward the blue light. Straining his eyes as they got closer to the light, the phosphorescing blue color revealed itself as a doorknob.

Riki put his hand on the doorknob and slowly turned it, feeling a faint but definitive resistance before the snap of the latch.

So the rumors he'd heard were true.

When he'd first heard them, the rumors were just the kind of bull that often came up in the course of lively conversations. Riki would only shrug and nod and otherwise demonstrate no interest or curiosity in the subject. But, *holy shit*, for real? Riki had never considered seeing for himself if the stories were anything more than urban folklore.

Riki released the doorknob. With a slight groan the door opened inward as if inviting them in.

Beyond the door lay more darkness. The two entered with similarly hesitant steps. The door closed behind them automatically and locked. At the same time, a faint glow rose from the floor, flashing like runway lights to urge them onward. After proceeding in this fashion for several steps they encountered a door in their path.

What, another one? Riki grumbled to himself. The routine was

getting tired already. But was it even a door? There was no knob or handhold. From a glance it appeared to be nothing more than a cold wall.

Riki stood there stymied for a moment. *Now what the hell are we supposed to do?*

As if in answer to his silent question, the wall suddenly pulled back and fell away. Without a groan or creak, and unlike any door he'd ever seen, the wall he thought was there wasn't a second later.

Riki was left speechless. No, the flood of raw red that eclipsed his field of vision brought to mind images of fresh blood. To his own disgrace, Riki's throat clamped shut as he froze there like a statue. As his eyes gradually became accustomed to the view, he saw it was no blood tide but a thick, bright red carpet. Riki swallowed hard.

Shit. That was intimidating!

And as if to cast off the awkwardness of the moment he made a show of striding inside with great purpose, examining the interior with a sharp-eyed intensity closer to a squint. Aside from the strangely antiquated chandelier overhead the room was empty and so sparsely furnished as to appear excessively dreary and uncomfortable.

And then the chandelier inexpertly began to turn. It rotated gently, without any grating noise, accompanied by soft, harmonic tones. As it turned, swaying the resplendent chains of crystal hanging from the end of each of its twelve arms, the light falling through the crystals split into fine bands of prismatic colors.

No sooner than he'd become thoroughly entranced by the wondrous, otherworldly tints, then the music ceased, and the chandelier stopped turning.

The closest arm of the chandelier extended toward the wall. A blue beam of laser light shot out of the arm and pointed to a spot where the wall gaped open, as if it'd been peeled away.

Where the hell did it go?

Inside was a hallway wide enough for two adults to walk abreast. Identical rows of doorways lined both sides of the hallway. Some appeared to be in use, marked by lanterns of an old and familiar make. Riki pushed on a door marked by a flickering red lantern, with a look that encouraged Iason to join him.

To the dubious proposition that he should accompany Riki unseen into this unknown place, Iason didn't raise so much as an eyebrow.

Iasou's infuriating lack of expression made Riki narrow his eyes in anger. He's heard that the engineered bodies of the Tanagura elite were perfect in body as well as mind. But upon observing his cold, thoroughly emotionless countenance, quite unconsciously the suspicion bubbled up: *Is this guy a machine even to his brain cells?*

The sign on its facade identified Minos as a bar, but in fact it was a brothel. Having set up shop deep within the maze-like alleyways, customers were unlikely to wander in off the street. And equally unlikely that it would be listed in any tourist guide.

It was a well-established institution, known only to people in the know.

The entranceways there in the dark behind the front door indicated the "Red Zone" (to purchase the company of women), the "Yellow Zone" (to purchase the company of men), and the "Blue Zone" (bring your own).

Payment was in cash only, no plastic accepted.

The automatic door closed and locked, starting a real-time metering system. This payment system was Riki's only real reason for choosing the place. As long as a customer paid the bill, his pedigree didn't matter. Riki had heard this was the only establishment in Midas that'd open its doors to a mongrel such as himself.

In the slums where guy-on-guy sex was the norm, the opportunity to do it with an honest-to-goodness member of the opposite sex wasn't likely to just drop out of the sky.

In Ceres, women capable of giving birth were its scarcest resource.

Nevertheless, though the slums never saw females exceed ten percent of the population, neither were males who got sex-change operations just as highly valued. In the eyes of the slum mongrels, once a man always a man.

While those who didn't have what it took to compete might be denigrated as losers and fools, the downtrodden never dared to piss on those who tread on them.

The world of the slums personified the primeval meaning of "the survival of the fittest." A man did what he had to do to stay alive. His personal glamour or popularity or skills at self-promotion were all beside the point, as was any presumptuous inclination to act righteously.

The prize sought by one and all was to stand before the rest of them and flaunt his power as a man. Whatever his physical shortcomings or sexual predilections—or rather, whatever his "difficulties" in bed—all that was put aside if he only demonstrated a talent to lead others.

Sharpness of mind more than made up for any handicaps, and a man's sex life was his own business. Naturally, those lacking power or smarts ended up doing the bidding of others. No matter how much they lamented the harshness of their treatment, no one had any sympathy for the underdog.

Stated in concrete terms, sexual predation and gang rape were part and parcel of everyday life, castration and dismemberment being the hardly unusual end products of the kind of gruesome abuse that went on constantly.

You watch your own back. That was the iron law of the slums.

Forfeiting the very symbol of his masculinity, stripping away that which by birthright he had earned as a male, was to make a man a virtual pariah and outcast in this warped, male-only society. Consequently, no one harbored thoughts of dropping out with the hopes of passing as a "woman."

But in Minos money was all that mattered. A man could buy a

woman by the hour and enjoy all the sex he could afford. While the prospect of passing the time in that kind of dream was to a slum mongrel close to paradise, perhaps the greater joy was fulfilling the twisted and dark desires of having a representative of the scornful citizenry of Midas—man or woman—under his thumb.

Moreover, the beauty of the working girls and boys in the Minos "stable" was rumored to surpass that of competing establishments. It was also bandied about that they were all "pet" rejects. There was no way to know one way or another. These were but a sampling of the secrets feeding the popular, furtive sport of rumor mongering.

As far as Riki was concerned, he couldn't have cared less about the "truth" behind these rumors. Had the events of this night not taken him in such an unexpected direction, he likely never would have stepped through the front door of Minos.

Nor was he about to deliberately pay for sex. It wasn't that his sex drive was on the wane. In the final analysis, when it came to sex, Riki wasn't interested in anybody but Guy, his "pairing partner." That hadn't changed since he'd become the designated leader of Bison.

Before meeting Guy at Guardian, Riki had a "one and only"—a person he believed would be his until the end of the world, someone he wished to protect and could not bear to lose. But there was nobody like that now.

Which was why he would be hard-pressed to explain why things were turning out this way. He was unable to repress the feelings roiling up inside. His emotions were getting out of control, something that hadn't happened since Guardian.

Not to mention that he'd never paired up with a Tanagura Blondy. It really did strike him as a perverse joke. But as much as he wanted to laugh, he couldn't—other than permitting himself a quiver at the corners of his mouth.

After entering the room, the two of them remained silent as usual. Riki sat on the corner of the bed. At a loss at what to do with his long legs, Iason settled on the couch and leaned back, as if waiting

to see what Riki was going to do first.

Riki licked his lips, ill at ease and feeling that Iason was forcing his hand with his ostentatious silence. Neither willing to make the first move, it was in that fashion that a good ten minutes passed. That proved the limit of Riki's patience. He flamboyantly stripped off his clothing and dove beneath the covers.

But Iason only shot him a cool, presumptuous glance and hardly stirred so much as an eyebrow.

All the more annoyed, Riki raised his voice, "Hey! How long are you gonna sit there? I didn't come all the way here just for fun, OK? Let's get on with it already."

"When you miss your mark, is it your practice to pick someone up and make your money that way?" His cool, resounding voice was suffused with undisguised derision. "Unfortunately, I am not so whimsical that I would choose to lay my hands on slum trash like yourself. I have better things to do with my time. This attempt to force on me such undesirable hush money is not only unwelcome, but downright embarrassing."

Riki's face flushed red. His lips quivered, feeling that his pride was being stomped on.

However the Blondy then added, "On the other hand, you perhaps have ulterior motives?"

Hearing the situation stated in such unadulterated terms, this time Riki felt the blood draining from his face. *Ulterior motives?* The only person acting with ulterior motives was this Blondy, the Blondy who had cut a slum mongrel a break on a "whim."

Needless to say, Riki found that hard to believe. No, rather it was the thought that he alone was in the grip of this incomprehensible and irritating ill temper that really pissed him off. Getting fucked over and—quite contrary to his nature—just taking it "like a man" pissed him off even more.

If he'd only bowed his head to the Blondy's authority in the first

place, he likely wouldn't have ended up here.

Except that Riki had no idea what being an "elite" really meant to a Tanagura Blondy. He'd hardly know the difference between one of the alpha males of the privileged classes and a hole in the wall. He was a kid who didn't fear touching the hot stove because he'd never seen one before.

"Well, if you ain't hot then why'd you tag along? You wanted to chat up a slum mongrel so we could get to know each other? C'mon, let's do it! I told you, didn't I? I don't owe anything to anybody." Riki unloaded on Iason without holding back. "Starched shirts like yourself haven't got the faintest idea what it's like getting hauled off to jail by those Pleasure Quarters cops. They treat us like garbage. You screw up and get collared and they're likely to give you a face lift with their fists. They'll bone you black and blue for good measure and then toss what's left of you in the nearest dumpster."

The specific details of what he was relating might have all been exaggerated second-hand knowledge as far as Riki was concerned, but any resident of the slums knew the punishments he described were not. He didn't have a Midas ID card and there was no denying the reality that its absence alone was sufficient grounds to deny him fair treatment as a human being.

"I've seen enough to last me a lifetime. So that's why I'm saying to you: Go on. Take your best shot. Anyway, don't you elite Tanagura types walk around all day with a gold-plated billboard on your backs announcing how you're so much better than us ordinary folks?"

Barbing his words with sarcasm, Riki flashed a careless smile.

"Word is, the used-up pets that make their way to Midas, male and female alike, end up sticking their asses out for anybody." He'd heard as well that sex shops like Minos were the final stop for these pets on their way down to the bottom.

"So I guess that if you've never sampled anything but posh, well-mannered merchandise like that, then an ill-bred mongrel would be too far below you. Am I wrong?" He meant to be provocative,

kicking at the blankets with his right foot. "fine with me. Run off with your tail between your legs. Nobody's looking."

He spoke with an insolence bordering on the arrogant. Rather than a broken gelding groveling before the powerful, the tremendous pride he took as a wild beast revealed itself in a particular kind of sexual energy that surpassed any competing ambitions.

For a moment it was enough to move the otherwise imperturbable Blondy. *Whoa, he's a lively one*, his expression seemed to say. "In short, you're saying that finding yourself in debt to a disagreeable partner, you choose to settle accounts with your body?"

"It's a win-win way to clear the debt, right?" Riki smiled with an exaggerated smugness that raised the corners of his mouth. "I figure if it's good enough for the slums, it's good enough here too. That's why I'm willing to do it with you."

Not raising his voice to Riki's transparent provocations, Iason answered in an even tone. "Don't forget. *You're* the one who came on to me." He spit out the words but otherwise made no expression, patiently maintaining his composure until the very end.

Which is why Riki totally misread the situation, and failed to grasp the deeper subtext beneath the surface meaning. Knowing only the suffocating stench of the slums, in this world Riki was the real idiot, and quite ignorant of that fact as well. Turning the threat aside, Riki stared him down. No one was gonna fucking out-bluff him!

But what was the lie? What was the truth? When it came to the lives of the elites in the "sacred" city of Tanagura on the planet of Amoy, a resident of the slums like Riki had no way of knowing the difference between rumor and reality.

Nevertheless, it had become an established fact in Riki's mind that the Tanagura elites took as pets humans born of flesh and blood and used them as a fashion statement to show off social status. Not to sate their own physical desires, but to watch their oversexed pets play with each other, or so he had heard.

Male or female, it made no difference. He'd also heard that the

spent and discarded pets collecting downstream in the brothels were generally afflicted by nymphomania, an addicted state resulting from the chronic use of aphrodisiacs.

Of course, Riki couldn't begin to imagine how and why the pet of a Tanagura elite would get dumped in Midas, to say nothing of their eventual fate. The subject didn't interest him and he hadn't ever cared enough to find out. Riki had always believed that the humanoids couldn't be expected to understand the complexities of human physiology and human emotions.

In Iason's own sneering words, Riki was trying to force *undesirable hush money* on him. Yet some discernable part of Riki's desire to pay him back with his own flesh arose out of a genuine curiosity about the body of this artificial humanoid.

Commensurate with developments in brain chemistry and biology that had pushed human intelligence to the limits was the allure of the perpetually youthful body. Riki could only assume that these "Gods of Beauty"—the Blondies that engendered in others such envy and fear—should sport the same hyper-functionality as the sex androids.

The fact of the matter was, while he'd pulled Iason all the way to Minos, he still harbored some doubts. Like whether a Tanagura Bloody with such refined tastes would want to sleep with a slum mongrel in the first place. And whether he'd be satisfied even if he *did* get laid. Riki simply hadn't thought these things through.

But having come this far, no matter how the game turned out, there was no going home again. He was playing for keeps.

All his refined grace on display, Iason approached the defiant Riki. Yet Riki didn't check his caustic commentary. "You're certainly a fine piece of work. If you don't feel confident stripping with the lights on, feel free to turn them off."

"How about a preview to start with? Simply to confirm that the encounter won't be a waste of my time."

What's this asshole getting all high and mighty on me now for? Grousing

under his breath Riki nonetheless yielded to the request. He got out of bed and leaned nonchalantly against the wall, exposing his body to full view.

Though still in the midst of his growth spurt and a bit on the gangly side, his naked form revealed the well-defined muscles of a firm yet supple body.

In addition, any description must note as well that this feral child had grown up in the slums without any kind of discipline and control. But whether Riki's body rose to standards of Iason's aesthetic sense or not—accustomed as he was to the very finest grade of pets—was a separate issue.

His cool gaze traveled across Riki's bare skin. It wasn't repulsively lurid or dank, but neither did Riki feel a throbbing heat between his thighs in response. Which might have been why, more than the assault of a visual molestation, the sensation stimulated was that of having his flanks stroked with the keen edge of a blade.

A blade fashioned from cold, smooth, hard steel. And very sharp. The thought alone brought out goose bumps on his skin. "Well, do I pass?" Insolence and defiant to the end, spoken in a tone of voice pregnant with provocative desire.

"Good proportions. Good enough for the Diaz harem's stable. Providing you could stand there and keep your mouth shut."

Riki wasn't sure why a Tanagura Blondy would be privy to information like that, but otherwise didn't let it get to him. "Same goes for you. You shut that damn mouth of yours and the headliner at the Ruska Club couldn't compete. Not to mention that if what you've got *down there* is any match for your face in the size and firmness department—but that's only if you have the technique and stamina to keep it up and keep 'em coming and coming."

"You seem very well informed."

"Well, without all the bullshit rumors to throw around, life in the slums would be too puking dull to stomach—"

Riki found himself in an unusually talkative mood. In response to the frigid gaze falling on him as if from a great height, he gestured defiantly, not intimidated even by the ever-present air of omnipotence in Iason's cool voice.

Despite leading boldly with his chin, Riki's performance unexpectedly faltered at times, as the Blondy debated the worth of what this mongrel was offering. It'd only be natural to look the merchandise over, feel it over, really, as Iason's roaming fingers briefly strummed the strings of Riki's senses.

He wasn't imagining things. Not the throbbing of blood in his veins he hadn't felt in the slightest the moment before. Not the fleeting tendrils of panic. He wasn't *that* inexperienced. He hadn't intended to play the bashful and embarrassed, put up a false front, or pretend to be more than what he was.

If anything, the disquiet in his heart was telling him: *This is not how it's supposed to happen!*

Riki knew where the wellsprings of a blood-roiling rapture could be found. How his sex life compared with that of other people he couldn't say, but with Guy, his pairing partner, it had never in any respect been lacking. Not to mention that he took no shame in the thought of crying out and reveling in the pleasure.

With the tip of his finger—and with a cold efficiency—Iason sought out that hidden pleasure place, still wearing what felt like a silk glove. Riki was initially indignant and offended. *What, I'm gonna let this fucker treat a slum mongrel like some sort of walking germ factory?*

Iason's fingers glided across his skin, gradually exhausting any excess energy Riki had to spare for his angry condemnations. It was a burning difficult to describe.

But different.

Different how?

No, not that.

Then what?

Pressing his lips together tightly, he felt a fleeting moment of confusion, not knowing what and where and how to deny the personal volition spilling out of him—

Iason softly massaged Riki's nipple with his thumb, making the boy's breath catch abruptly. Slowly, inexorably, the throbbing, tantalizing excitement—

The stroke and rhythm of the ball of his thumb pressing through his gloved hand leapt in intensity, an altogether different sensation confounding Riki's senses. Perversely aroused, his nipples grew hard and erect.

Iason's other hand loosely glided down Riki's spine, brushing against his tight buttocks and then slipping between his thighs.

Riki started.

In the same instant, the inexpressible sensations began to pulsate in his lower extremities. Suggesting a desire to mock this half-conscious reaction, Iason embraced him and pressed him against the wall, forcing apart Riki's thighs, as he parted his thighs.

From stillness to action.

At that moment an unexpected and steep change descended upon Riki, as if throwing a switch and sending a sudden rush of blood coursing from the heart.

He swallowed his voice and set his face. The chill of the wall against his back was not nearly as shocking as being unable to move, since his hands were held easily behind his back.

And then a different kind of rigor raced through his whole body. Pinned firmly between Riki's thighs, as if to confirm the ripened state of the exposed fruits, Iason's knee swayed back and forth. The unresolved, throbbing pleasure only encouraged further awareness of the increased stimulation.

Riki's loins thrust upwards as the excitement grew. The foreplay could not possibly be thought of in terms of mutual satisfaction. Loathing the one-sided nature of the frottage, he tried to shrug it

off. Deliberately and surely, Iason forced a full comprehension of his tenaciousness on Riki's consciousness.

Rising up on his toes to mount Iason's knee, Riki all but wove his flesh into the fabric of the wall. Iason even clasped and raised his arms above his head, holding them to the wall.

It was an unbelievably awkward and ungainly posture. Riki hit his lip, realizing now that he was being unexpectedly docile.

Looking down at him with the cold weight of his high and mighty bearing, Iason plucked at Riki's erect left nipple with fingers that seemed entwined with the beating of his heart. The pulsations through the smooth, cool fabric raised a burning fever in his skin. He wasn't imagining things. Iason left off strumming at the nipple and gently sank his finger into Riki's flesh, toying with it.

The insides of Riki's thighs suddenly undulated like a wave in slow motion. As if to tease him, as if to string him along, he pressed down on the peak in a circular motion. That alone raced Riki's heartbeat to a brutal rate, pounding out a lascivious rhythm in his left breast.

Albeit delicately, the loving caresses seizing his heart in its talons would not stop. And now the previously overlooked right nipple hardened quick, causing Riki to spontaneously cry out.

Both nipples throbbed with a stabbing intensity. Further in and further in, the constricting waves of pleasure wound at last around his throat and engulfed his hips in a merciless fire.

"*Hah—hah—hah—*" Riki stifled the inarticulate groans, hardly believing he could be brought to the verge by the manipulation of his nipples alone. The uncontrollable waves of pleasure showed no signs of slowing. The ceaselessly rising currents of heat coursed up his spine.

The hard bow of his manhood, slippery-wet with the precum dribbling from the tip—

"*Ahhhh—*"

—in that instance, to the accompaniment of his unrestrained gasps, erupted in a single, rending burst. The rapture arced like electric sparks across the back of his eyes.

And yet it came as proof of a degree of shame he had never tasted before.

His bound arms twitched and shook, his feet couldn't find purchase against the ground. He was a disheveled, mangy mess, stretched out as if on the rack. Yet holding Riki firmly against the wall with a single hand, Iason wouldn't allow him to sink down to the floor. The humiliation burned.

He ground his molars together. Willpower strained to the breaking point and his racing heartbeat quietly faded away. He could do nothing to rid the bitter reflux of bile in his mouth. As if to break Riki's already cracked pride, Iason quipped, "Coming that fast is surely nothing to be proud of."



He had no easy excuse to offer the mortification thrust in front of

his face. Hanging his head, amidst the roiling thoughts in his head he found nothing to say in return.

The blood boiling in his veins gaudily advertising his debasement, he could only bite down on his lips until the flesh trembled and turned white. "Let go."

But Iason did not relax the finger digging into Riki's wrist. Far from it. "What? Did you really intend to resolve things with such a pathetic performance?"

The softly falling voice above his head coolly skewered his reality. "You're saying you've got no use for me?" For the first time Riki knew the pain contained in words of even casual disdain.

Grabbing his raven hair and tilting his head back, Iason looked Riki straight in his coal-black eyes. "You are the one who chose to buy my silence in such an inconvenient manner. Is it too much to ask that the payment be commensurate to the cost?"

He pressed his demands as if insisting upon what was his by right.

"What are you getting at? You want a little harem-style oohing and ahhing? Not a technique we slum mongrels go for."

"Well, you do seem sufficiently sensitive enough without it. There is nothing wrong with testing those vocal chords of yours every once in a while."

"Huh. You're pretty full of yourself."

Riki stubbornly lashed out verbally, even if he knew at this point that the darts would never find their target. Iason's matter-of-fact manner of speech made it clear that all joking aside, he wasn't exaggerating. Riki had learned the hard reality of that fact through personal experience.

No, the mercilessness with which he'd proved he could walk the talk went way beyond being a smart ass. It gave Riki the shivers. He'd already begun to regret his provocative and scornful treatment of Iason.

"I am deigning to treat slum trash no different than a Tanagura pet. And you are still not happy?"—that kind condescending talk was not by itself disagreeable, and Riki had never before seen a man for whom it was such a perfect fit.

And not only that, but in a different sense it tore at the emotional boundaries between Riki's ego and id. "In that case, then how about at least taking off your clothes?"

Compared to Riki, who on top of being stark naked had been forcibly brought to an unsightly climax, Iason hadn't even bothered to remove his gloves. He tightened a cheek in a sardonic smile. "Why should disciplining an ill-bred, thick-skulled mongrel require the removal of my clothes?"

It felt like getting slapped in the face so hard, it made him rock back on heels and catch his breath.

"Do not misunderstand, mongrel. *You* are the prize so clumsily forced upon me in exchange for my silence. Do as I ask, then, and give cry out for me and we'll call it even. Nothing more."

Iason was brilliantly handsome and was right there in front of his face. Riki focused his two black eyes unblinkingly on that bewitching personification of beauty. *What's this motherfucker—!*

But despite a brain on fire, his festering, wounded pride rotting down to the roots, Riki finally grasped that he couldn't parry the lance of Iason's cool gaze in the slightest. It was a most frustrating realization. From the start they had been cast in completely different roles.

Only now did this knowledge come to him. The indomitable spirit of the king of Hot Crack couldn't mask the fact he was nothing especially compared to this Blondy elite. The world contained more kinds of people than his mind could fathom, and he now felt the truth of this like he hadn't before.

Despite harboring all the regrets in the world, his aroused and obstinate willpower remained, though he never possessed the patience to see it torn out of him, kicking and screaming, in bits

and pieces. Neither had it occurred to him that Iason's sense of "whimsy" had only further solidified his hard-core, never-say-die attitude.

And perhaps having on his hands a plaything that answered back for the first time in a long time, Iason's curiosity was piqued to a degree quite unlike himself. Either way, Iason had already—half-seriously, perhaps—intended to tear at the roots of Riki's stubborn pride.

Unaware of these intentions, Riki had become ensnared in the strong and alluring web of Iason's presence. Iason had chosen this path in a similar state of ignorance, entranced by the curiosity that was Riki.

While coldly matching his intense stare, Iason slipped his finger toward Riki's shadowed groin. Not in the tantalizing manner he used before, but with bold directness—without hesitation, he brushed past Riki's limp member. With his palm and fingertips he sought by touch the two spheres. Closer to a routine manual inspection than a loving caress, the fondling left Riki discomfited.

As if seeing right to the heart of Riki's feelings, Iason smiled just to the corners of his mouth. Such a smile showed not a trace of cloying lewdness. It was an exquisite but equally frigid smile that sent a shiver up the spine.

In that moment, Riki knew that Tanagura Blondies were uncompromising tyrants with mean streaks wider than any devil's.

Awhile later, the silent room again filled with the waves of Riki's ragged breath. The atmosphere, moist and stagnant, shuddered with sweet and wistful moans. Dark and carnal desires arising from pleasures indulged in without protest coiled here and there about their extremities.

He had no idea how long it went on. Enclosed within Iason's arms, Riki suddenly called out in a voice verging on a bellow. "*E—enough already!*"

His breath was labored, his words filled with a strange energy. The

coarseness of his voice accentuated by the sweet, throbbing numbness stabbing at his loins, filling the sounds issuing from his lips with an artless tremolo.

"I—I—am—not—a—toy!" he spat.

Then, as if his breath was catching in his throat, his lips and throat contracted.

"Gahhhhhh—"

An intense, tingling sensation strong enough to make him want to cry out or moan. Riki had never known such pleasure, burning inside his skull as if his brain stem was on fire.

If the sex he had with Guy could be said to be the very definition of "normal," then contained within the one-sided stimulation delivered by Iason was a kind of pain that felt as if his nerves had been stripped bare and mercilessly lashed. It was equally sensual and profane.

Riki clung to Iason's arms, nails digging into his flesh.

But the singing string of pleasure only tightened and would not cease. Any urge to ejaculate was thwarted by the tight vice of Iason's fingers. Riki's ready and willing member could only ooze eager drops of precum without obtaining release.

With a finger pressed up his ass, Iason had Riki at his mercy. The bud hidden between the cleft in his cheeks, that Guy always patiently unfolded with his fingers and tongue, Iason relentlessly exposed with the lubrication of his precum alone.

Deceived by the finger being forced inside himself, the stinging, biting pain, and repugnance disappeared.

"And here we find the bud of your pleasure?"

If the symbol of a man's sexual desire was his erect penis, then the root of that joy was the prostate hidden in his anus. Having it mauled without restraint was far from pleasurable. This turning of a man's nature against him had become more akin to torture.

Iason, though, appeared to enjoy inflicting the paroxysms rising from Riki's throat to head, causing the gasps that shook his whole body.

There's nothing wrong with really testing those vocal chords of yours.

Riki couldn't believe those words were the simple product of Iason's superiority complex. But perhaps it reflected the disgust the elites felt, with their artificial bodies, toward the humans born of flesh and blood. To the extent that any such feelings figured in his thinking, Iason expertly and unflaggingly tortured the mongrel in his captivity to Riki.

Riki wanted to come. *But he couldn't.* Worse, the stimulation continued on unabated, his genitals continued to smolder. The spasms shook his feet and shot up his backbone.

Iason toyed with those basic male impulses, teasing at the man's sexual emotions until he could take no more. Cruelly not allowed to come down from that peak, Riki's voice almost broke into tears.

"Let—me—come— Please— Quit—jerking—me—off—half—way—"

If someone had been hitting him upside the head over and over, then he could grit his teeth and bear it. If he'd been mercilessly stabbed in the back, then he could at least spit out words of defiance. But the burning agony scorching his viscera had already crushed his nerves. The desire to ejaculate must necessarily triumph above all else as the most basic instinct of a male.

I have to come!

With trembling mouth, quivering fingertips, and tortured body he pled his case. Without shame or honor. Over and over.

And when he did, Iason finally freed him. Perhaps having taunted him to his own satisfaction, or having lost interest in the human toy once he had made Riki beg so beautifully.

Exactly what he'd been dying for. His pride and will tossed aside, he'd finally been granted what he begged for: release.

However, from his trembling lips poured not rapturous moans but sighs of relief. In the guts, at the core of his brain, he was overcome by a drained feeling after the frenzy was swept aside. As soon as Iason let go, he collapsed on the spot as if his very soul had been exhausted and spent.

The frosted eyes looked down at him from a commanding height. As if the thought had just occurred to him, Iason stripped off the semen-smeared glove and tossed it in the trash. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. He took a coin from his pocket and tossed it at Riki's feet.

"And here's your change. For the hush money. You're right. Neither a borrower nor a lender be."

His chest heaving, Riki licked his lips over and over with his numb tongue. His legs quivered with small, twitching convulsions. Lacking even the energy to hide his privates, he had nothing to spare for any backtalk, either.

Even when Iason left the room without a backward glance, Riki hardly moved a muscle. Like a cowardly, beaten dog.

five minutes. Ten. Nothing passed but the futile, faded time. Riki finally grunted and sat up. His eyes fell on the coin. He didn't know what he was looking at, except that it was a gold coin with a geometrical pattern inscribing a crest or seal stamped on its surface.

He clenched his teeth and in a flash grabbed it. "What the fuck?" He shakily scrambled to his feet. "So that was a Tanagura Blondy—" Ruminating over these words, he shook his fist, tightly grasping the coin. "That asshole!"

A Tanagura Blondy and a slum mongrel—like parallel lines that were never going to cross, Riki now knew that their lives spanned a gap impossible to bridge. Having not even exchanged names, the heavy, unnatural sense of discomfort remained.

In the truest sense of the word, this was for Iason and Riki their *beginning*.

Chapter 3

Though two weeks had passed since that night of disgrace, the gnawing sense of humiliation continued to smolder in Riki's gut. With no place to express itself, the incurable fury raged within. The entirety of the shame stuck with him.

Unsurprisingly, since that day Riki had not trodden the Midas streets again. Far from any talk of "cruising," he could hardly get the first syllable out of his mouth. Instead, he sullenly bit his tongue. Day by day the crease furrowing his brows only grew deeper and deeper.

If he only could have repressed the abominable events, he could have lived a happy man. But whenever he closed his eyes, there in his head was the man's cold and beautiful visage, as if branded on his senses.

"When you miss your mark, is it your practice to pick someone up and make money that way?"

Communicating arrogance infused with intimidation, his uniquely cool voice clung to Riki like an incessant ringing in his ears.

Shit!

And still the painful misery of being able to do nothing but groan remained. What really pissed him off wasn't Iason's ridicule, though ridiculing a man's sex life was a blatant violation of the commonsensical customs in the slums.

Even in a "love hotel" at the outskirts of town, Iason hadn't lost an ounce of his dignity and majesty. Far from it, to the Tanagura Blondy who had all of it and more to spare, Riki would never be anything more than a prostitute who made a practice of hitting on men and selling himself for pocket change.

This realization was mortifying.

There was no doubt about it. He was the one who'd strong-armed

Iason in the first place and had riled him up until he'd gotten what he wanted. His stubbornness and pride was in Iason's eyes the mere reflection of his selfish and spoiled character.

The thought alone made his throat burn.

"Do not misunderstand, mongrel. You are the prize so clumsily forced upon me in exchange for my silence. Do as I ask, then, and give cry out for me and we'll call it even. Nothing more."

The cold and calculating remark, that could not be taken as anything other than the abusive language that it was. Stabbing at his gray matter, the festering poison at times welled up and scalded his pride.

He ground his teeth together. His temples throbbed. He hadn't experienced such feelings of disgust since leaving Guardian. And yet, he knew in his heart there was no easy cure for the fevered thing throbbing away inside his body.

Within the constrained limits of a world of a child, he could always plug his ears and close his eyes to that which was painful. In Guardian, that had been the only "right" allowed an immature child.

But now things were different.

Regardless of a man's maturity or immaturity, all the whining and complaining in the world wouldn't make a difference. In the slums, where the law of the jungle held sway, a man's words and action always came back to bite him.

Riki knew that reality as well—the reality that he couldn't make what had happened just go away. It weighed heavily upon him.

He was in an ugly place. There weren't enough hours in the day to transfer all the memories to some oblivion outside of the daily grind. But he had no other course to take but to persuade himself. It made him unbearably miserable.

How long would it take to mend his splintered emotions? He couldn't begin to imagine.

Of course, what had happened to him was less of a freak chance than a freaking miracle. Running into this strange man again, let alone getting within spitting distance of another Tanagura Blondy, was the last thing he expected to happen anytime soon. But despite this, he couldn't scrub the memories from his mind and go back to his old, carefree existence.

Being called "slum trash" so easily, the humiliation of being ridiculed and toyed with by those cold, emotionless eyes. His pride was beaten black and blue, and it just wouldn't heal.

The shameful memories of being so cruelly abused grew all the more vivid in his mind. Even during the well-accustomed bouts of sex with Guy, he could not blank out the mocking memories coiled stubbornly around his heart.

"Coming that fast is surely nothing to be proud of."

Shut up.

"All your supposed power is so much empty boasting."

Enough already!

"And here we find the bud of your pleasure?"

Fuck of!

"Still here—"

The teasing voice entwined around his skull, clinging to him tenaciously, its plaguing fever engulfing him.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit!

Miserably. Awkwardly. He could only grind his teeth and rage against the darkness. He was his own worst enemy.

This is not who I am!

He bit his trembling lip. Not some sort of waking dream, it was more like dropping acid and having a bad trip. There was no way that Guy could ignore Riki's high state of agitation. "What's up with you, Riki?" he whispered in his ear.

Riki languidly lay there relaxing his limbs and collecting his breath. Of course Guy noticed that he didn't seem to be "there" in body and spirit the way he used to be, and was getting a bit fed up with him.

"Did something happen?" he used the same gentle tone of voice that he always did. Brushing back a playful lock of hair that had fallen across Riki's forehead. Guy's warm hand felt no less comforting than it always did.

Riki was where he belonged. Guy more than made him feel how true that was. And yet—

Why?

How?

How had his thoughts been made captive by that monster? "It's nothing," he mumbled, the words like bitter brine oozing out of the corners of his mouth.

"You sure?" Guy pressed.

"Sure," Riki answered nonchalantly, but even he knew what lay at the heart of the matter—what Guy wanted to hear and what was likely on his mind. The feelings he didn't wish to express. In their mutual commiserations, in the certainty of their shared body heat, there were supposed to be no lies.

Guy trailed his tongue from the nape of Riki's neck to his earlobe, tightly entwining their lower extremities together. "Let's do it then." The heat growing in his young body was straight to the point. "Can you still get it up? I haven't nearly had enough."

Putting his uncontrollable desires into words struck the spark. With Riki as his partner, no matter how many times they went at it, he

could never get enough. Guy could not help but be conscious of his thirsting, animal passions.

Those passions hadn't changed in the slightest since they were at Guardian, and had only strengthened his desire to further monopolize the parts of Riki that great good luck had made his own.

Riki might think that he was using Guy to his own selfish ends, but Guy knew differently. He wasn't attractive enough to justify dragging his sorry butt around out of sheer momentum. Neither was he as patient as people around him seemed to think.

It was because of Riki. Riki was his partner, and Guy knew well how eternally forbearing he could be.

He could still remember the small body in the darkness, in the middle of the bed, hugging his knees and shivering. When Riki closed his black eyes—eyes that made enemies of all those reflected in their intense glints—he became another person entirely. So young.

Then one night, the Riki who'd reached out his hand and grasped his was nowhere to be found. And even though it was long past the time when Riki needed his protection, Guy could never forget that he had sworn in his heart to protect him.

He never would forget.

Guy took great personal solace in the fact that he alone knew Riki's true, unguarded countenance, wrapped in so many layers of fierce, bulletproof pride. On the other hand, Guy was quite aware of the depth of the hunger he felt toward Riki.

More.

It was never enough.

Want me more! Desire me more!

Guy was not blind to the extent to which he'd become ensnared in this overpowering sense of attachment. At Guardian, the

unpleasantness of the task notwithstanding. He had to come to terms with the depth of this wide difference in desire.

Without saying a word, Riki draped his arm around Guy's neck and kissed him, making like he was coming on to Guy. Changing the angle of their mouths like two lovers standing on tiptoe, indulging in the deep kisses, switching the position of their bodies, entwining their tongues. As if to totally assuage Guy's misgivings and anxieties.

Or rather, as if to thoroughly extricate from himself the last vestiges of Guy's presence wrapped around the core of his being.

And yet another two weeks passed. Riki still couldn't rid himself of the fever that consumed his viscera. He testily burned through the wasted hours and filled the empty spaces inside with junk food.

"Yo, Riki. You alone? Something you don't see very often." Zach Rayburn hollered out to him. Zach fenced the plastic Riki and his friends stole in Midas. "Haven't seen you around much lately. What's up?"

That was the way Zach usually said his hellos, and he didn't mean anything bad by it. Riki knit his brows together.

When he did so, the few bystanders nearby gulped and averted their eyes. Zach paid them no mind. Far from it, he pulled up a stool and sat down, his muscular height all bent over and bunched up. "Hey, Riki. You ever thought of being a courier?" he asked, getting to his point immediately.

"A courier?" Riki narrowed his eyes and gave him a long look. He'd been stuffing his mouth with a "fin"—a thin, lard-smeared, crepe—thin, reconstituted meat product on bread. He stopped long enough to breezily reply, though with no signs of taking offense. "You're a fence. When did you turn into an employment agency?"

Reacting to the imagined insolence in the tone of Riki's voice, the goons lurking behind Zach (who'd typically taken to casting

menacing glances at everyone) narrowed their eyes at him. But neither Riki nor Zach seemed concerned.

Zack's brown skin and closely cropped white hair setting off his tapered ears made clear that he was no resident of the slums.

Among the sightseers visiting Midas there were those who, for whatever reason, stay behind in defiance of the immigration laws. Those 'refugees' who overstayed their visas and couldn't go home again if they wanted to, were maligned as "sinkers." But to Zach these people were not doomed to violence or desperation or misery.

Nobody knew why this stranger of unidentified origins had hung around in the slums for so long.

But even when dealing with the slum mongrels—the "parasites" that made a living "picking through the trash of Midas for table scraps"—Zach didn't make them bow or scrape. A businessman through and through, he treated everybody the same. His unusual nature was his calling card. In one way or another, everybody in the slums knew who he was.

"Not what it sounds like" He gulped down rest of the poisonous-looking ale. "Fact is, an acquaintance of mine told me to ask around." Zach lowered his voice to an exaggerated hush. "Seems that the guy he was using screwed up and he won't have use of his services for a while. So he's had his eyes out for a sub."

"Huh. What kind of risk factor are we talking about?"

"I don't know the particulars of the job. But seeing as he's not looking for a mere errand boy, I figure it's gonna be as risky as you'd expect a job like that to be. For what it's worth, the money's gotta be good."

"Not caring whether it's a slum mongrel doing the job sounds a mite suspicious to me."

Ceres wasn't listed anywhere on any official map of Midas. But like an open secret, even visitors to Midas with no prior knowledge of the slums could nevertheless sense the existence of a "red zone"

teeming with the unwashed masses, where they must never go.

That was the reality the residents of Ceres represented to the outside world. Midas didn't recognize the existence of any civil rights within Ceres either. The brief so-called "honeymoon" with the Commonwealth following the independence of Ceres was now dead.

Tanagura was the star system's renowned "metallic city," sitting there in the shadows cast by the Midas lights. The Commonwealth human rights NGOs and lobbying groups were intimidated by its presence, and all too willing to give the problems of Ceres a pass.

No matter its shortfalls in human resources, no one was inclined to lend a helping hand to the disagreeable mongrels inhabiting the problem-ridden slums. The slums were forever trapped inside the suffocating box, gasping for breath.

But Zach scoffed at what passed for "common sense" in the world. "Look, the way I see things, you prove yourself useful and nobody's gonna check your resume." And furthermore, "That doesn't mean I'm willing to sign up any old body. The decision-making got left to me so my own reputation's on the line here."

Implicit in his nonchalant air was the message: *That's why I chose you*. It was a message that tickled Riki's pride. Probably the only reason he wasn't suspicious right away was because of the strength of Zach's character.

"What do you say, Riki? A simple face-to-face can't hurt, can it? If you don't like what you're hearing, feel free to turn it down on the spot."

Perhaps if Zach hadn't always treated Riki with the respect of an equal, he would have been franker and more bullheaded in his negotiations. On that point alone, Zach had definitely earned a reputation among Riki's fellow slum mongrels as a decent human being. Zach had never tried to make a hard sell with a crap hand.

A courier. Riki liked the sound of those words. Needless to say, had Guy been there with him, looking for the loopholes, he would probably have dissuaded Riki from the get-go. Still, an

uncharacteristic sense of curiosity—more than the invisible but ever-present asphyxiation filling the slums—enticed and won him over in the end.

"Okay. When and where do we set this thing up?"

Ten minutes after three in the afternoon, Midas standard time. Flare (Area 2). Though dusk was still a while off, the human tide flowing through the district housing the high-class boutiques and restaurants had hardly abated.

Automatic "capsule cars" used by the tourist trade paraded back and forth along the roadway. The spic-and-span sidewalks stood out beneath the blue sky, dancing with shimmering colors as far as the eye could see.

Since that day, Riki had taken a break from cruising at night. But to him, who rarely ventured into the city outside the Midas Pleasure Quarters, the view from the outer circumference of the double rings of Midas wasn't the endlessly intriguing sight he'd imagined. Rather, it was all that defanged bawdiness exposed to the bright light of day he couldn't tear his eyes away from.

It's one big make-believe world after all.

If Ceres was a stifling, suffocating dump, then at night the highfaluting Midas Pleasure Quarters was a bottomless, swirling swamp of deception and desire. Ask whether the mongrels (who enjoyed more corrupted liberty than they knew what to do with) or the citizens of Midas (who lived behind the unseen glass walls of their invisible cages) enjoyed the greater freedom, and the true answer would be a long time coming.

The future isn't written in stone.

Such slogans from the Ceres independent movement, now ancient history, had long since passed from the collective memory. But Riki seriously believed he must seize this opportunity that had so unexpectedly fallen into his lap. No matter how heavily reality pressed down on a man's shoulders, if he was given the faintest breath of a way out, he could change his fate.

That was the truth Riki knew. The same as when he'd been suffocating within the glass bars of Guardian—a jail pretending to be a playground—and he'd encountered the indispensable Guy, the touchstone of his survival.

Nobody's future is written in stone.

Even if this was all some bait-and-switch, he could use it somehow, in some small way, to change his life around. With a scrap of courage and a little bit of luck, Riki knew he could make it happen.

If he didn't change, the world around him wouldn't change either. Nothing would happen. His future was in his own hands, and he had the feeling that right now this was something more than a mere daydream.

At the outskirts of the gleaming modern streets, Riki leaned back against the walls of the urban canyon and once again studied the card in his hand.

WED 15:30 MOGA-E- [R + B] 805 (#07291)

Those were the only characters printed on the card Zach had given him. Once his part of the transaction was completed, Zach gave a meaningful smile and walked off. "Well, good luck."

Later Riki took a closer look at the card and clucked to himself. No problem with the time. The stuff about MOGA was probably a ward or street name. Or perhaps the name of a building.

But located where? He hadn't the slightest idea. As a consequence, Riki ended up wasting half a day wrestling with the Midas maps on an ancient computer, searching through each area. *And why the hell am I the one doing this?* Spending time and effort on such an exasperating endeavor was stupid and it pissed him off.

He seriously considered tearing up the card and throwing it away right then. But half out of sheer stubbornness he pictured Zach's face in his mind and while directing at the imagined visage a stream of torrid curses, continued to pound away at the keyboard.

He didn't know the particulars of who Zach's client was, but sensed

that written in invisible ink between the black characters printed on this ordinary white cardstock was the proviso: *We don't care who you are or where you're from, but we've got no use for the useless.*

Perhaps it was a psychological quirk ingrained in the soul of every slum mongrel. Or perhaps a vision arising out of his excessively ego-driven nature. Either way (*fuck all!*), the indisputable truth was that he went at it with more drive than he usually did.

On top of it being an ancient piece of junk, Riki hardly ever laid eyes on a computer in the course of his daily life, so the whole process took far more time than should have been necessary. But despite that, the fascination of untangling this engaging puzzle compelled him.

C'mon, cough it up. I'm definitely figuring this thing out.

Since being stripped of their rights as citizens of Midas, it was to be expected that the residents of the poverty-choked cesspool that was Ceres would be branded savages of the lowest order, below human dignity and intelligence.

Charged with giving and providing its wards with an equal education, Guardian accordingly pounded into them the basics of computer use. Except that after being forcibly evicted from this "paradise" to their living quarters in the slums, they found themselves in an environment quite incapable of capitalizing on those skills or drives.

It was no surprise that apart from a small group of dedicated fanatics, such an education was, to the vast majority, completely useless. Incidentally, bound up in the Zein class system, school attendance figures in Midas also revealed remarkable disparities.

So indoctrinated were they with an awareness of their own class, they lived happily with whatever degree of knowledge was on a par with their own lot in life. Thus, a considerably large number of illiterates were found among their ranks.

Nevertheless, they firmly believed that being in possession of their Midas residency cards elevated their worth as human beings far

above that of the mongrels of the slums. And even if they happened to be unsatisfied with the hand life had dealt them, the existence of beings below them on the totem pole tickled the subconscious with a warped kind of pleasure.

Such was the ugly reality of Midas's control of the populace.

In the end, Riki personally experienced the commonsensical reality that the unexercised mind and body inevitably go to ruin.

And now he was in the Moga ward. To be sure, he had no positive proof that this was indeed the place. "Moga Ward, East 15-9-32, Red Baron" was not listed on the official Midas tourist maps, but what looked at a glance to be a small, nice and tidy "business hotel" was the only thing he could see.

The establishment, an "escort club," apparently sold "beautiful dreams" (he had no idea what kind of "dreams") to old and young, male and female alike. As shady as the place struck him, at this juncture, Riki had ceased to be surprised. He'd turned over enough rocks and gone through enough pain to find the location of "R + B."

Whether or not his search would be rewarded was another subject. There were plenty of these little known places not found on any official maps. Not to mention that when it came to this type of members-only play zone, frequented by a hard-core clientele, he could hardly expect to waltz in the front door. In the end, Riki really had nothing.

Considering the time of day, he could have predicted that the place wouldn't be doing big business. On the other hand, there might be another way in besides the front lobby. Though nobody had crossed the threshold for some time now—

He made it inside without the bother of a pat-down and unconsciously drew a deep breath of relief. Pumped up, he headed directly to the elevators and headed for room 805.

He arrived at the door, his face tense and drawn. He punched the key code—"07291"—into the lock and paused. A green light blinked on indicating the door was unlocked. Riki swallowed hard despite

himself. This moment was the fruits of a half-day's hard work at the computer terminal. For better or for worse, it was possibly the turning point of his life. Uncharacteristically, the fingers curled around the doorknob trembled slightly.

The stark, utilitarian room reminded him of an office. Waiting for him inside the room, reclining deeply into an executive office chair, was what appeared to be a man of uncertain age with a striking, if androgynous countenance. If it were not for the cruel scar on his left cheek, he would have been a perfect fit at a few of Midas's higher-class establishments.

However this was no ordinary guy. He glanced at Riki with severe, gray eyes. "You're right on time. Good. You passed your first test." Not a trace of kindness softened the tenor of his voice.

So it was as Riki had suspected. Following the clues on the card he'd gotten from Zach to the door of this room was the first hurdle he'd had to surmount in order to become a courier.

The man gazed at Riki with that same poker face, not inviting him to take a seat on the sofa.

"Name?"

"Riki."

"Age?"



"Almost sixteen," he answered honestly, in the same moment

wondering if he shouldn't have padded that number a bit. But the man didn't seem inclined to split hairs over his age.

"Have you been informed about the particulars of the job?"

"Not at all. Zach said that, for the time being, whether or not I take the job would be settled after I met with you."

Riki figured right now he had at least a fifty-fifty chance. But he didn't want to go there. He wanted this job so badly he could taste it. Somehow the icy atmosphere the man engendered about himself—so similar to Riki—made him hate the idea of being thought *too eager*.

As if he could see right through Riki the man laid out the conditions: "I don't need a kid to run errands for tips, or some little smart-ass who'll be pawing through the packages for pocket change. You'll be my arms and legs. You'll get the merchandise to its appointed place at the appointed time, no questions asked. You don't need more than the average amount of brains or courage. And I don't need a cur that's constantly pulling at the leash and not heeling when he's told. That sound like something you can manage?"

He spelled it out without a flicker of emotion on his face.

The reason Riki reacted with no unnecessary disgust or contrariness was because, like Zach, the man didn't appear to care that he was a slum mongrel. Far from acting out of magnanimity, Riki sensed that he was a pure meritocrat. He wasn't searching for superiority in the blood, only whether he could do the job. And if Riki could, then he wasn't going to debate the matter.

The impassive scar-faced man was giving off a vibe that was already creeping him out. But to a slum mongrel wasting away the hours and days immersed in his own depravities, with no chance to give shape to the shards of his dreams, this unexpected luck falling on him was more enticing to him than a four-course meal shoved under his nose.

Waiting for life to arrive on his doorstep only ensured that nothing

would happen. Riki answered back. "Give me a shot."

"Keep in mind that this shall be considered a binding contract." The man lit a cigarette and took a long drag. "I'm Katze." He took a card case from his breast pocket and placed it on the table, indicating with his eyes for Riki to take it.

When Riki clumsily picked it up, examining it with curious eyes the man said, "Good thing this wasn't a waste of our time." For the first time his mouth turned up at the corners.

This encounter between Riki and Katze, the infamous black marketeer, might have been called fateful.

Katze was a smart, silent slender-faced, well-mannered man whose outward countenance did not match his character. Though not exactly a misanthropist, he cared little for anybody outside those he met in the course of his business.

This was not some facade, but the way Katze lived his life. Somehow or another, Riki sensed a common bond with this man and it left him with a strange feeling. Katze didn't delve deeply into Riki's private life, and in exchange shared only the bare minimum of information about himself. *When you're living on the black market, there's no profit in the past* seemed to be his motto.

Still, plastic surgery these days could easily erase that scar from his cheeks. Riki suspected leaving it there intentionally served as a kind of warning. He didn't earn a living with his face. That mark alone said that he was a man who would do what had to be done.

Desires arose within Riki that had utterly fled him when he was stagnating in the slums. *Some day, for certain—*

He knew that the day when his dreams were no longer futile was coming. He didn't know the first thing about Katze, and he couldn't have cared less. He wasn't there to make friends. He hadn't come there with any expectation of getting personal. To Katze, he was simply another mule among many; nobody needed to tell Riki. He

understood that well enough.

Katze, however, was the only one keeping his thoughts to himself. For better or worse, every age and breed of badass wanted to give the new guy, Riki more than the requisite helping hand, and Riki had to wonder where the hell they all came from.

Even so, there wouldn't have been a problem if Riki had possessed the kind of ingratiating personality that could have managed but a single, diplomatic smile. But, of course, Riki couldn't be anything but Riki.

Riki had never once wished for a bad reputation. He'd become accustomed to the strange looks cast his way, and even when not consciously ignoring them, for the most part, they flitted past in his peripheral version.

Nevertheless, from his experiences to date, he'd gotten the inkling that his existence became for a certain type of man (he didn't yet grasp all the requisite conditions) a kind of stimulant, exciting them such that they could not leave him alone.

Despite this realization, he wouldn't discipline himself and attempt to turn aside trouble before it started. He knew to a mind-numbing degree how futile such efforts were. In the first place, trying to imagine what hadn't happened yet was a pain in the ass, and Riki wasn't curious enough about other people to get stressed about shit like that.

But perhaps because nobody knows a thief like another thief, Riki's particulars got talked about without him doing anything to advertise the facts. Those whose minds changed on the spot and those who always went along with the crowd—his stance toward them didn't change. A simple reflection of his stubborn nature perhaps. It was all the same to him.

The couriers were divided into two factions: uniformed regulars called the Megisto, and a mercenary contingent known as Athos. Generally speaking, the Megisto had taken a particular disliking to Riki while Athos was disinclined to pay the masses any mind.

Nevertheless, as a resident of the Ceres that had been extinguished from the official maps of Midas, this slum mongrel remained something of a novelty. Or perhaps they'd even considered this teenage punk a fellow compatriot from the start?

Wherever he looked, whenever he turned around, there they were, with their inquisitive stares. The fights, the obscenities mingled with scorn exchanged under the cloak of humor. There was nothing unusual about him at all.

And he got a clue. Biography was a boat anchor when swimming in the dark waters of the black market. Yet, as hard as he tried, he could not shed the tendrils clinging to him from out of the past: the perceived slights, the visceral disgust, the irrational prejudices.

He'd been well-acquainted with that sort of thing since the day he was born, but these days he simply didn't have the time to overreact to each in kind, to pick at every slight.

The low man on the totem pole. As the word suggested, there were mountains of never-seen, never-done things that a spanking-new courier had to digest. At the same time, tutoring this stone-cold, pissant little kid—devoid of even a breath of his youthful charms—in their sort of hard schooling was a prerogative liberally indulged in by his seniors.

Riki being Riki, he kept it bottled up until he finally exploded. And when the knock-down, drag-out fight erupted, the bystanders watching with broad grins on their faces got a clue as well: there was nothing special about the despicable word "slum mongrel." Rather, it was Riki himself—with a gaze that threw off sparks of arrogance—who was the rare breed.

Katze was not surprised that Riki should so recklessly take on guys in weight classes far superior to his own. He knew the ins and outs of street fighting and wasn't overly impressed by Riki's unexpectedly strong stance. Nor could he fault Riki for the way he compensated by hitting hard below the belt.

In his own dispassionate voice Katze said, as if he'd been expecting it all along, "So I guess the boss of Bison is more than a paper tiger."

Never imagining that the name Bison would have any currency here, Riki wiped the blood from his lips and glared at Katze. "In a fight, the strongest man wins and the man who wins is the strongest. When your life's on the line, nobody cares if the money's dirty or clean."

"Well said. That bunch believed they'd have no trouble showing a runt half their weight what's what."

Their intent may have been to show that bastard what's what, but it turned out, the bastard knew how to kick ass when it mattered. Rather than running his mouth off, Riki had fucked them over, and it'd be a long time before they got over the embarrassment.

Muscles built at an exercise machine in a gym were for show only, no match for a body tempered in actual battle.

"They let appearances fool them into underestimating their opponent and found themselves on the ground because of it. They no doubt learned a valuable lesson."

They didn't need to hear this from Katze. If anybody had learned the painful truth that Riki couldn't be dismissed as a "little kid," it was those who'd touched the hot iron with their bare hands.

"Even so, don't go taking everybody you meet as another mad dog baring his teeth," Katze said under his breath, his words hinting at deeper, darker truths.

Eye for an eye, down to the flesh and bone—that was the iron law of the slums.

Just because he'd grown up in a different sector, didn't mean he had to do everything their way. Whether he picked up the gauntlet that'd been thrown down in front of him depended a lot on his mood that day, but he always settled a score on his own terms and in a definitive manner. That was his policy.

"You really don't care when they call you refuse that crawled out of the septic tank of the slums?"

No, it wasn't being called septic tank scrapings that got on his

nerves. It was their fetid, bullshit posing, poisoned and choked by clinging twines of curdled prejudice. But saying so would change nothing now. All the better that their education be a thorough one. Teach them to think before speaking. Make pain the instructor and they'd never forget.

These thoughts on his mind, Riki glared at Katze. Katze answered with a lopsided grin. "That's a damned scary stare you got there." He lit a cigarette. "Prejudice is not a state of mind easily changed. There's no shortage of assholes who spin the finest of webs with their words but speak another language in their hearts, and it's going to stay that way for generations to come."

He came straight to the point as he languidly puffed away at the cigarette. "That's because the mongrels of Ceres are nothing but the talentless dregs, worn down in their depravities. Goes without saying these days. So get used to how the Market works. She's a harsh mistress that only the fearless survive."

He looked into Riki's black eyes with an expression that was entirely sincere. "Keep your ears open. Don't avert your eyes from reality no matter what happens. And keep your mouth shut. That's how you get ahead in this world. Understand?"

This was Katze spelling out the way he lived his life, and for a long moment Riki couldn't avert his eyes from Katze's gaze.

A short time later he was amazed to come across the rumor that Katze was an alumnus of the same slums as himself. *Seriously?* The information gave him the kind of shock he hadn't felt for years, stunned him like a blow to the back of the head.

Riki had to believe that flashing the cruel scar on his cheek was Katze's way of saying: *This is what it means to crawl out of the slums. Do you have what it takes to do the same?*

"Yeah, I've got what it takes," Riki whispered in his heart. If the only other avenue open to him was to grow old steeped in the sludge of the slums, then he was not about to let this hard-won chance go to waste.

The scramble for territory in the slums began anew. This was not a safety maneuver to release his stored-up energy, but a way to keep the rust from growing in his joints and seeping into his brain. He knew the consequences of *that* all too well. He was definitely working his way up in the world, Riki promised himself anew, gazing upon his future self with unclouded eyes.

"I don't need an errand boy. I need somebody who'll act as my arms and legs and who can get the merchandise to where it needs to be."

Still, it was only natural that a newcomer like Riki should start out as an errand boy. During this period he proved himself quick on the uptake, determined and never intimidated—a real asset to the team. He gradually took on more valuable assignments.

Despite having grown up in the same slums, Katze did not single him out for special attention, and Riki indulged in no expectations. Everybody knew that Katze was not the type to tangle the public and the private.

Far from it. Having made his own way and achieved the status of broker in the black market meant that Katze would be even harder on Riki, who had come out of the same environment. Or so one would think. Still, Riki racked up a winning record without a word of complaint.

And as he did so, the job became all the more interesting. Riki plunged into the depths of the black market, taking it in quickly and easily. He began to make a name for himself as "Riki the Black."

Chapter 4

The moist, heavy breeze blew in from the sea and across the tangled, verdant woodlands of the green belt. Riki flew his jet bike to Orange Road, the boundary line separating flare (Area 2) and Janus (Area 6).

He parked his bike as he always did in a specialty garage on the outskirts of the purple city and strolled alone down the sidewalk. The streets were bathed in bright sunlight cut through by dark shadows. It was not yet noon and the pedestrian traffic was light. As a consequence, the familiar play of light and shadow falling from the clusters of buildings struck him as unusually listless.

With the tourists still recovering from their all-nighters, this was perhaps the most peaceful time of the day. Taking it all in at a glance, Riki continued his stroll.

It was also the best time of the day to be crisscrossing the borders between the Areas in Midas and yet keeping to the posted speed limit. And the best time of the day to go for a walk in the middle checking out the tidy, litter-free streets. At first it had all impressed upon him a kind of malaise, causing him to stumble a bit in his gait. But by now he was well used to it.

He turned off the main thoroughfare onto a side street. Riki nonchalantly sharpened his senses as he passed through the back door of a legal 24 hour drug store. That was the entrance reserved for use by the couriers. A scan of his right palm opened and closed the door.

Katze's offices were in the sub-basement.

Riki had gotten a page from Katze two hours before. As there was no indication this was a rush job, Riki showed up when he usually did, ten minutes before their scheduled appointment.

The sub-basement was accessed by means of a custom-made elevator, about which it seemed everybody had an opinion:

"Nobody uses old junk like this anymore."

"Man, I can't understand why the boss goes for this old-fashioned stuff."

"Enough already, I say. Time to exchange it for the latest model."

Replacement parts were impossible to get for the ancient electric elevator unless special-ordered.

Why the incarnation of capability and rationality that was Katze should fuss so over this antique was a mystery. Riki inserted the cardkey he'd gotten from Katze and the elevator doors opened. He stepped heavily onto the platform and the door closed. The way it swayed back and forth was familiar to him now, and prompted a slight yawn.

Riki didn't know how many floors below street level Katze's office was. There were no panels or indicator lights in the elevator to specify the floor. The elevator simply stopped Where Katze had his fortress, and that was all Riki really needed to know, so he didn't let it bother him.

The elevator was hardly the end of the oddities in Katze's office. More than simplicity for simplicity's sake, Katze banished anything frivolous, unproductive or useless from his environment. His office was like an inorganic black box. No matter how many times Riki came, it stilled jarred him.

Katze struck him as an obsessive-compulsive freak. The odd vibe about the place left him feeling constantly off balance. On the other hand, as discomfiting as the room was to Riki, who was steeped in the chaos of the slums down to the souls of his feet, the office's clearly androgynous atmosphere was a perfect complement to Katze's personality.

With the same roots in the same slums, every time Riki came here he could not help but feel the extent of the distance between them. This must be the difference between the made man and his unmade underlings.

Recognizing his presence, Katze shot him a welcoming look as always. But unusually, when he didn't push aside the computer terminal on his desk, Riki figured he'd got his timing wrong. He glanced at the sofa in the corner, the only object in the room that made the space feel more comfortable.

In the place usually reserved for him, he found two kids sitting together. *I didn't expect this*, he thought. *Guess there's a first for everything*. As far as he knew, Katze never allowed people unrelated to work into his office. Children were out of the question.

The kids struck him as not so cute as they were handsome. Their eyes and mouth possessed a cherubic quality. From a cursory examination" he couldn't tell how old they were. That was the kind of attractiveness they possessed.

The two sat so perfectly together like a pair of dolls, the sole ornamentation in the bleakly-furnished room. Riki had to wonder if they were there simply to add diversion for the eyes. He restrained himself from laughing at the apparent joke.

Both of them were swaddled down to their ankles in luxurious robes from a long ago, bygone era, lending to their identities an additionally mysterious aura. Taking all this in, Riki grew suspicious that Katze—typing away at the keyboard without a word of explanation—was somehow testing him.

The one wearing blood-red ruby earrings had a head of unpretentiously arrayed blonde hair that even from a distance looked soft to the touch. The image of *that* Blondy's magnificent, long golden hair sprang to Riki's mind. Recalling the painful sensation as he had just swallowed a small bone, he cleared his throat.

The other child's lustrous black hair, gleaming and equal to his own, flowed over his shoulders, neatly squared at the ends.

Perhaps to draw more attention to their sculpted features, a large sapphire was embedded in their foreheads. Riki was no connoisseur of jewelry and had equally little interest in their value, but he had no doubt that their ruby earrings and the sapphires in their

foreheads were genuine.

At the same time, he could also say that the two did a good job at hiding that ethereal essence they possessed. Yet the two kept their eyes tightly shut the whole time, not acknowledging his presence with a single glance.

finally Katze spoke. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Straightening things tip. Took me a bit longer than I expected to find a good place to leave off." This explanation accompanied by what sounded very much like a sigh of relief.

"And Alec?"

At the mention of Riki's partner, Katze said succinctly, "Number three warehouse." Katze had been hurrying to put together the manifest for the cargo shipment.

From the first time they'd teamed up together, Alec had taken the new guy under his wing. "Maybe a picture's worth a thousand words, but looking ain't doing. It all comes down to experience."

That was Alec's pet phrase. More recently he'd taken to leaving all the preliminary work and various odd jobs to Riki so he could concentrate on procuring the resources for the consignments.

It all comes down to experience.

And it was all too easy for Riki. But as a lackey getting worked harder than some and seeing it all credited back to his easy-come, easy-go partner, Riki couldn't help imagining that Alec just wanted to lighten his own load.

Even though he'd heard that the job this time involved shipping a package to the frontier Laocoon district, Riki wasn't all that surprised. He only raised his eyebrows when he learned that the "package" consisted of those two kids.

Not taking the direct route but going via a cargo ship said a lot about the origins of the two as well.

Yeah, but they're still a pair of tykes, thought Riki. By this point in his

life he hardly fancied himself a moralist when confronted with other people's personal predilections. But when it came to pervs and prepubescent kids, he wouldn't touch any of 'em.

A mere courier throwing a fit about it wouldn't change a thing, But on the other hand—

Giving the two of them another good looking over, Riki quizzically tilted his head to the side. He just didn't get it. What with the pierced ears and the bindi in their foreheads, he could tell at a glance that they hadn't been brought up in a run-of-the-mill harem. From what little he could see of their exposed countenances, they were the highest class of pet.

The kind of pet also sold through back channels. Considering the ironclad rule among merchants that sale items go through a thorough quality control check, it was incomprehensible that the both of them be *coincidentally* blind. But that wasn't the kind of query he was going to raise right in front of their faces.

Katze spelled out the current arrangements and the two were bundled up by one of his assistants and carried out of the room. Riki didn't need to be told: *No need to go turning over rocks. Just do your job.* Still, the desire to know overcame the certainty of a firm rebuff.

But Katze came straight to the point. "That was a Layana special edition."

Riki momentarily caught his breath. "Didn't he close up shop a long time ago?"

"That's what the public has been led to believe for now. But there are fanatics out there ready to pour money into certain pockets in order to get their hands on dolls like that. If you can't deal with the inclinations you're born with in an above-board manner, then you go underground. For the businessman, everything starts with an unmet demand and grows from there."

Katze indifferently related these facts of life, leaving his personal feelings out of the equation. Riki, in contrast, couldn't hide the

looks of distaste on his face. Katze didn't flash a cynical or ironic smile in reply, but in the same, neutral tone of voice flatly declared: "It's not up to the Market to decide what is ugly or what is pretty. Your only job is to do your job well. Stop thinking so much."

"Yeah, I get all that, but—" was all Riki could get out, choking down the bile rising in his throat.

Layana Hugo. The name alone had survived the legendary edifice that was to Riki nothing more than mere rumor. Once upon a time in the garish neon-lit Midas streets, it was the one place that gave people the creeps. Too dark a name to answer the simple satiation of personal desires, it was a shop of horrors arousing visceral disgust even in the most permissive of pleasure-seekers.

Gentlemen and ladies alike. High-minded men of character and the pure of heart. Men and women were reduced to "male" and "female," rationality and moral standards stripped away as the raw, human animal was brought into the light.

The girls and boys Layana Hugo sold for sex by the hour were so beautiful that they drew stares of astonishment. But none of them were totally sound in body.

Even when the deformities arose out of the natural hereditary process, they were chimeras produced by chance mutation. They were created deliberately through genetic engineering. All in the heartless pursuit of the perfect countenance. Pathetically so.

But all this work wasn't just so they could show their creations off to the world. These "fairies" had no other purpose but as sex dolls for deviants.

They were all blind, not so much in order to placate consumer tastes, but rather so that the customer should be less self-conscious about his own deviancies. By eliminating the need to see, the remaining senses could also be correspondingly sharpened.

In order to prevent the customer from suffering an accidental bite, in order to ensure risk-free oral sex, at a certain age the teeth were removed. After such a manner they were instructed from a young

age solely in the skills of the bedroom. Mutant sex dolls that never stepped one foot out of the room they were furnished with for life.

Riki reacted to the thought of them the same way he did smelling the fetid odor of the slums. Unrevivable, but alive. The living dead. Simply the despair of rotting away in a jail called "freedom." There were more perverts in the world, so-called "dilettantes" unsatisfied with "normal" sex, than he cared to think about.

The psychological burden of a person's own sexual deviancies became too much for him to handle. The reason for the Midas Pleasure Quarters was to condone and accept all those frustrated and self-indulgent carnal desires, embody them, and make them real.

Moreover, there was no fretting that the excesses of a private desire might be made public. No one would divulge any of those secrets. A customer need take no dangerous risks. This was a Shangri-La, where people could do whatever they liked to their heart's content.

Visitors entranced by the possibilities could be counted on for repeat business, hence the reason why the immortal night never ended in Midas.

Then a successful businessman, the scion of an aristocratic family fabled among the Commonwealth star systems, grew so attached to one of these mutant sex dolls that, suffering greatly in body and soul, finally blew the two of themselves up in a suicide bombing.

The nobleman who annihilated himself had the reputation as a dignified and high-minded pacifist. Consequential to the ensuing scandal, Layana Hugo, the city's champion of the perverse, vanished from its streets.

Though he had neither money nor social standing at his disposal, the name of Layana Hugo became known to the further reaches of the star systems, spoken among those who had no connection whatsoever with Midas.

Had they quietly offed themselves instead of going out in a carefully planned blaze of violent glory, the magnitude of scandal

would have been considerably diminished. Had the man only considered his own reputation and that of his family, he would have died in the darkness and consigned the truth of their deaths to oblivion.

But instead he chose to take his mutant sex doll to a very public death with him, leaving unanswered the intractable puzzle of what prompted his diseased mind to end his life in such spectacular manner. His relatives were at first convinced it was only an accident, or that he'd gotten swept up in some conspiracy, or that he was the victim of an act of terrorism. The attention of the galactic mass media focused on Midas.

Fearing that the fallout would damage the legendary, "risk-free" image of the Pleasure Quarters, the high officials in Midas quietly and expeditiously set to work on the cover-up.

The frightening and scandalous death of this man, said to be a "veritable billboard for the Commonwealth star systems," put at risk all those whose reputations were also tied up with the Commonwealth. It could strike the spark that would burn even those who lived and worked in Tanagura's shadow.

Or so they feared.

Contrary to this sense of consternation, the man's family—still in the dark about the incident—demanded that the authorities conduct a thorough investigation. They had more than enough money and influence to make themselves heard, and so whipped the media into a frenzy. They finally got fed up with the spin and indecision of the Commonwealth officials serving as their intermediaries. Taking things into their own hands, the entire family gathered together and relocated to Midas.

Denouncing a Midas that had wrapped all details of the incidents in a veil of secrecy, and possessed by the conviction that they were there to speak truth to power, nobody could stand in their way.

Or perhaps this family, whose authority held sway over every other planet in the galaxy, seized upon a heaven-sent opportunity to make Amoy kneel before them. Toward those ends they took the

unprecedented step of suing Tanagura, making exorbitant, unheard-of demands for compensation.

Midas, which had up to that point been earnestly maintaining its silence, tired of the family's outcries, and divulged all the details of the incident. Caught unawares, the family was shocked into silence. Flustered family members swooned on the spot.

Thereafter, they informed the mass media that the entire incident had in fact been a conspiracy to damage their reputations. Repeating these hysterical allegations every chance they got kicked up a lot of dust but accomplished little as their good names sank low in the cesspool, the expected restitution of their honor never arriving.

In the wake of the unprecedented scandal, the doors of Layana Hugo's demon-haunted pavilion were chained shut. Yet it proved at best a pyrrhic victory for this once noble family, now a pale shadow of its past, glorious self. The messes tourists regularly got themselves into rarely even made it into the news, and never to the extent of that scandal.

It all really happened, Katze blithely claimed.

In the meantime, Layana Hugo had gone underground and was in the process of planning a comeback. He'd revived the operation sufficiently to start taking orders for custom-made sex dolls.

The man's family had used their status, money, and power to lead Commonwealth officials around by the nose. Their sudden fall resulted in a desperate struggle for power among the government elites. The shrill charges of "conspiracy" ultimately rang hollow.

Or did they? Didn't evil men continue to spin their webs in the shadows? Could anyone prove they did not?

"No matter how rich, blood can always spoil. A giant organization will crush the little man, yet a single weak link can bring the whole edifice crashing to its knees," Katze continued.

"Was he really that rotten and spoiled everything, or was he a hero? Shouldn't it be decided by people involved and not strangers?"

"You find this all too irrational?"

"It's all the same to me. I figure what others label just and right is only one version of the truth. In any case, I'll do as I see fit."

"Even knowing that you'll be despised by the person right in front of you?" Katze gave Riki a hard look with his ash-gray eyes.

For some reason, Riki's breath caught in his throat. He couldn't avert his gaze. He didn't understand why Katze would say such a thing, but he had to believe that it was motivated by something other than the story of the man who'd driven his family to destruction.

This was not like Katze. Riki got the feeling that he'd caught a glimpse of real Katze through a crack in his cold, imperturbable mask.

"Maybe if it's beyond compromise, then you just learn to deal?" Riki said, feeling the need to speak under Katze's heavy gaze. "Once you come to the realization that some people are never going to be happy with you and you can be okay with that, you give up the half-assed effort to be some sort of saint, don't you think?"

Riki was saying the kinds of things he rarely gave voice to.

"If you've only got two hands to hold onto the most important things in life, then no matter how much you may loath it, the third one's got to go."

It was a universal truth that no human being could ever scratch an itch hard enough to make it right. The hands of the slum dwellers that did scratch that itch were empty of hopes and dreams. And yet, Riki held this thought in his head: *You've only got two hands to hold onto the most important things in life.*

The weight of that aphorism was even now deeply engraved on the face of the person saying it.

"So whatever you can't hold in your own two hands, you get rid of?" Katze said to himself, his cheek twisting as he reflected on the meaning of those words. And when he did, the wound that ran like a rift across the attractive visage of his fixed, emotionless countenance seemed to tremble. That scar had earned Katze the nickname "Subzero Scarface."

Riki was startled by the unexpected vividness of the reaction. Katze plucked a cigarette from his favorite cigarette case and lit it with practiced ease. He took a deep drag and slowly exhaled, a scene that had also become quite familiar to him.

"I see. That constitutes your unshakable policy then." Katze returned to his usual form, "I don't recall learning anything of the sort at Guardian. A conclusion you came to on your own? Or one you learned at someone else's knee?"

The mention of Guardian caught Riki off guard. Ordinarily when Katze had a face-to-face with Riki, he didn't breathe a word about the slums. He never engaged in long bull sessions about subjects unrelated to work in the first place.

Riki couldn't exactly fathom the reasons why, but Katze was acting differently from normal today. Recently Riki had sensed a curious wind blowing through the place, a puzzle he couldn't figure out. It was a strange sensation, though not off-putting, so he'd passed it off as just his imagination.

In the black market there was a single person, a slum brother, who shared his past. He had no intention of vesting himself totally in this fact, but the hard reality of Katze's existence became a kind of compass needle for him. That was no denying that it set his mind at ease.

"When I left Guardian, Aire said that to me."

"Aire? Oh, you mean the *big sister* on your cell block?"

"She wasn't my big sister. She was a friend."

"So a block mate?"

"Not quite. She wasn't a *Donny*," Riki stated in clear terms, using the slum slang for a personal friend. "She was a *Mary*." He meant a close colleague or associate.

Hearing the words used in this context, Katze briefly hesitated. With a motion similar to that of a fisherman reeling in a line he tapped the ash from the end of his cigarette. "Not a Donny but a Mary, eh? You're splitting the hairs mighty fine there."

"I wasn't the one splitting the hairs," Riki said with a slightly forlorn expression on his face. "*They* were." No matter how many years had passed since leaving Guardian, some things never changed.

Katze neither smiled nor cynically grimaced, but only turned his quiet eyes on him.

Riki had no "friends" at Guardian. What he had were timid bystanders and onlookers who kept their distance, and enemies who sooner or later would extend their claws and bare their fangs. Yet there was one healing presence who understood him.

He'd shared his past and his childhood only with colleagues and associates. A relationship that he could honestly call a "friendship" had been as good as nonexistent. The only so-called garden in Ceres, Guardian was to Riki neither home nor hell, but a closed asylum.

"Of course. And? I take it Aire was your senior?"

"Three years my senior, to be precise."

"Three years is practically a lifetime at Guardian. And women have such glib tongues. She must have been quite a precocious girl to be handing out such wisdom at that age."

"I suppose. I just know she was beautiful. Everybody called her Saint Langeais. The Angel."

A sparkling platinum blonde with curly hair and eyes like two large emeralds. The nannies, as they were called, were wont to spiff her up and dress her from head to toe. Aire glimmered like one of the decorative angels painted on the ceilings.

"Now don't you go wandering off anywhere, okay, Riki? You're my good-luck charm. Promise you'll stay with me forever and ever?"

Nothing in this world could be as pleasing as the candy-sweet words Aire spun out of her cherry-pink lips or the goodnight kiss she bestowed with her charming mouth. Such a long time ago, and yet the memory remained green in his mind. Aire had been the entirety of his world.

And then that day, the screams and shouts echoing about in an uproar. The end result was a swarm of adults no one had seen before descending upon them and tearing their world apart. When Riki thought about it now, that was when dream ended and everything else began.

The Riki *then* didn't understand anything. All he knew was that he had been bound to the cruel wheel of fate and that as a child he was powerless to do anything about it.

But Riki's sentimental memories moved Katze little. "Huh. Sounds to me like an exception to the rule. In *that place* the rule was that all children were the same. Nobody was going to address you so coyly or single you out for special treatment. Had things changed all that much during your time there?"

The nonchalance of Katze's words wrenched in Riki's gut. He and Katze were referring to two completely different places. Riki steeled his thoughts and didn't lose his cool. "Isn't the idea that all children are equal and equally lovable just a lie? The kids who do as they're told and are easy to handle are labeled lovable. The stubborn ones that prove to be a handful aren't. And even then, the little bastards who insist on having things their own way are the worst. Everybody knows, even if nobody wants to say so. Even my cell block mother said I was a problem child without the whisper of a cooperative spirit." He pursed his lips in a sour pout.

Seemingly to grasp the essence of what he was saying, Katze stubbed out his cigarette and said, "Well, mother or sister, they're all human beings after all, aren't they? Whether children or partners, there's got to be some kind of chemistry going on between them."

Taking that to be the final word, Riki spoke. "I'm headed out to the number three warehouse. So I'll see you around."

He turned to leave and get to the job, and as he'd expected, Katze didn't try to stop him, Riki got onto the elevator, letting out a heavy sign as the doors closed.

A Mary, huh?

Unbelievable to think that he'd managed to recall a word like that at this time of his life. Only eight other people—his cohorts—shared a past with him beyond Guardian. Where they'd come from he couldn't say for certain, except that for as long as he could remember it seemed only natural that they should be together.

His room decorated in bright colors and angels and fairies and dragons—his downy bed—drifting off to sweet dreams—the carefree smiles and fragrant aromas—Riki didn't know what that place was and he didn't think he wanted to know. Because, in a way, that world had been everything he needed it to be.

"Bonbons" was what the men who visited now and then called Riki and the others. Riki hated it when they came. Nobody was allowed to leave his room on that day. Nobody was allowed out to play the whole day long. And what was worse, the juice the nannies made them drink on that day tasted like piss. It always made him feel like shit.

What the hell did it all mean? The dream world they were living in suddenly blew apart and Riki *knew* for the first time. The truth was thrust upon them whether they liked it or not. According to the commiserating adults of Guardian, they were adorable children sacrificed to service the desires of adults.

The shock of their reason for living, the full estimation of their self-worth being rejected outright. The shock petrified them to the core.

This is your new family now.

You have nothing to worry about anymore.

Hidden beneath those words, the pitying looks told them: *What was*

was, and you can't make it go away, as they brought them into the web of their influence.

Perhaps because Riki was the youngest, or as a consequence of rounds of medical treatments called "counseling," the memories he flashed back to here and there seemed nebulous and faded through the mists of time. Yet if he could barely even recall the faces of the block mates he lived with between the ages of six and eleven, then why did he so clearly remember the names and faces of his friends there—?

The platinum blonde Aire. Lean's blue-black hair and ice-blue eyes. Sheila's fiery red hair and amber irises. Ghil's unblemished white hair and scarlet eyes. Heath's straight, honey blonde hair and brown eyes. Raven's silver hair and gray eyes. No matter how many years passed, every face remained forever young in his mind.

By the time Riki had left Guardian at the age of thirteen, their number had fallen to five.

Women who could one day bear children became the communal property of Guardian. They wanted for nothing. No matter what the disturbance to heart or mind, in one way or another, the way was smoothed to becoming a member of the new family that was Guardian.

As Raven put it, "The good-for-nothing boys ride in on the girls' coattails." In the end the only survivor among them would be Riki.

Heath and Ghil and Raven—the pressure and stress accompanying the violent upheavals in their environment all too easily crushed them. They were too heterodox for a place like Guardian, bound hand and foot by decree that everything be "equal."

"Don't turn out like me. Promise me." Heath was the same age as Aire. Tears welled up in his eyes as he grasped Riki's hand.

"I'm really beat too," were Raven's parting words, his eyes glassy, his voice cracked.

"I definitely won't be like them!" Ghil had declared. With a worn

out, terribly contorted expression on his face, "I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Riki. I tried—I tried—but—"

His voice fell away. Riki grasped his hand. Ghil wept as he clung to him. Groaning, his voice subdued, cleaving to him, sobbing, his arms like thin sticks, a pitiful sight.

But he had to say something. "It's OK. It's OK. You don't have to keep trying—" Riki patted his dull, desiccated hair.

The next day he heard Ghil had slipped away as if taking a nap. Riki wept softly. He'd told him to stop trying— isn't that why Ghil's will to live had exhausted itself and the thread of his life snapped...?

The thought made his heart tighten like a vise. The pain grew unbearable. Guy hugged him. "You're wrong, Riki. You only gave Ghil goodnight kiss. He wanted you to tell him that it was OK for him to finally fall asleep. He was happy in the end."

first one, then two, then three of his friends had gone. Riki was the last one left. He didn't know whether to call himself lucky or not. In any case, Guardian had never seen such a troublemaker in all its history. The royal pain in the ass of all the "mothers" and "sisters."

Nevertheless, in a way, Riki was blessed. Though confined to this "garden" filled with lies and deceit, he'd been fortunate enough to find the one person who could understand him—Guy.



The day before they left Guardian, Aire came to see them. "Riki,"

she said. "Remember this: you've only got two hands to hold onto the only really important things in life. No matter how dear you may believe that third thing might be, it will have to go. Never let go of what's most important. Make no mistake. Once you let it go, there's no getting it back again."

Girls were moved to a different building once they started menstruating, after which they were rarely ever seen. But since it was departure day, Aire got permission to come and see him.

Having not seen her for quite a long time, Aire looked all grown up. For a moment Riki just gawked at her. The girl had become an almost unrecognizably radiant young woman. She did not cast off the raw aura of the female sex, but rather it seemed that the beautiful angel had arisen to heaven and become a goddess.

Perhaps someday she would sprout wings from her back and soar into the sky along with Ghil and the others. That was the vision that haunted his thoughts.

Aire held him gently the way she had before. *Always remember—never let go—make no mistake—* The sincerity of her words penetrated the depths of his soul and the emotions filled his heart, rendering him speechless.

And with that tight bear hug of an embrace Aire patted from his life forever.

Following the authorized route to the official jump gate at maximum velocity, it was a three-day flight to borderland district of Laocoon in the Veran star system.

During that time, as always, Riki treated the two dolls as so much merchandise. He spared no time for useless chitchat and did everything according to the book, in a businesslike manner and without a hitch.

They were accompanied by androids who sewed as full-time guardians and nursemaids, and so everyday life aboard ship was

relatively trouble-free. But Riki couldn't flush the unpleasantness from his mind. His only recourse in the face of such deceitful ugliness was to maintain a constantly cool facade.

The evolutionary origin of the species and the mysteries of life had by now passed from the domain of the gods. Even so, the weight of fate was not born equally. The sheep who knew nothing but what was required to live out the years inside the walls of their jail only had to do as they were told and accept whatever life threw at them.

In other words, a man knew no regrets who harbored no dreams.

One week later.

After the merchandise was delivered without incident and Riki returned to Midas, Alec had him around for a round of heavy drinking to cheer him up. This time alone Riki had been getting low, and needed some sort of distraction.

Riding that head of steam, he went to see Guy for the first time in a long time. Though without a good deal of liquor in him it was fair to say he never would look him in the face.

Riki quit Bison shortly after deciding to be a courier for Katze. Even though he'd started out as a mere errand boy, and even if he ended up as Katze's lapdog, he didn't think he could do both. The other couriers and Katze didn't think so either. Nobody knew how far this would take them, but once they had set forth on that course they drew the line clearly.

Each wanted something to show for it. That was Riki's immediate goal as well. He didn't fear failure. A slum mongrel had nothing left to lose. His myopic eyes blind to the future, the smoldering present in the slums was a low tide that never came in. There was no place to go but up.

Or so he thought. The reality was that Riki had attachments of his own to Bison, but no special fondness for it, and no particular loyalty to his title as the biggest badass of Hot Crack.

The only thing he couldn't afford to lose was his own self-respect. What he wanted to preserve was the connection between himself and Guy. When he really thought things through, that was it.

He hadn't gotten involved in the power struggles of his own initiative. He hadn't gone scavenging for leftovers or looking for chances to sneak in from the sidelines and grab something for himself.

In his own way, he simply brushed aside the sparks and embers that alighted upon him. Having built the reputation of Bison to what it was, that was the last thing anybody expected.

From the beginning Riki loathed "hanging out." Even though it meant swimming against the tide, it wasn't his intent to put on airs. He wasn't good at overriding his own ego and cooperating with others, and he hated having favors thrust upon him just as vociferously.

Riki took command of Bison as the situation demanded, and did what he had to do the way he wanted to do it. He couldn't have done it alone. Where he was lacking, Guy filled in the gaps. Luke backed him up. Sid tied up the loose ends and Norris smoothed out the edges. That, Riki believed, is what made Bison into what it became.

But Riki didn't want to get so attached to the name of Bison that he was just doing what other people wanted. That didn't mean he wanted to destroy Bison. That just made this moment in time the one Riki had to seize.

All the better if he stepped aside and somebody new took his place at the top. Or if they seized the opportunity to find themselves new homes to call their own. Riki wasn't particularly worried about Bison continuing on as Bison. His determination to get out hadn't changed.

But he'd have to be crazy to imagine that Guy and the others would cut their ties to Bison just like that. Even if Bison dissolved, Riki wasn't about to give up Guy as his pairing partner. Even if the current state of their relationship bordered on estrangement, Guy

remained the foundation of Riki's heart. That wasn't going to change anytime soon.

"Never let go of what's most important." Aire's words echoed in his ears.

He'd become a courier without first asking Guy's advice. At this late hour he didn't intend to start regretting that act of selfishness, but Riki didn't want to lose the warmth of Guy's presence.

But he had only two hands to hold onto the most important things in his life.

His own pride in what he could do—the ties that bound him to Guy—a dream job worth doing— Which of these could he afford to throw away?

Although Katze struck a convincing pose, the more Riki thought about it over, the worse his head hurt. A satisfactory answer had not been forthcoming for a long time.

"Make no mistake, Riki. Cast it aside and you'll never get it back again." Aire's words stabbed at him. Riki found himself gored on the horns of this dilemma.

Might it be better to abandon this policy entrenched in his mind? In that case, he wouldn't have to abandon anything else. But if he allowed himself to be pushed that far, Riki thought derisively to himself, what soul would be left?

"Riki? What's up? What's going on?" Guy said, seeing Riki unexpectedly staggering toward him.

His brow was furrowed, but not to find fault with or condemn Riki's presumptuousness as he took possession of the one comfortable bed. Guy greeted him in his always pleasant manner. "You certainly seem to be in a good mood. Things going your way?"

Things going my way?

Well, he had his job under control and the money was rolling in. So he'd given Guy the gift of some high-quality stout, a rare treat in the

slums. That's probably what he was referring to when he talked about things "going his way."

His mood was on an even keel. His mind was oddly awake, though his heart ached. A sense of malaise he couldn't quite put his finger on might have been what prompted him to blurt out, "Watch me crawl my way out of here, Guy—"

No, making such a clear statement to Guy must have been his way of pushing himself into a place where there was no turning back. Which of the three? Indecision gripped his thoughts. He was beginning to hate himself.

He had only two hands to hold onto the most important things in his life. If so, rather than be forced to abandon the third, he'd hold tightly to it, even if that meant taking it in his mouth and dragging it along behind him.

For a moment Guy looked at him, as if searching for the words to reply. "Yeah, sure—" he said in the gentle voice Riki was so accustomed to, Guy's lips curling wryly at the corners.

Yet Riki managed not to notice. He had no way of knowing how his words burrowed like poisonous thorns into Guy's heart.

Chapter 5

The man's magnificent golden hair was proof of his privileged class and his membership in the highest ranks of the elite. His piercing, god-like visage engendered about him an unapproachable sense of dignity. The authority in his glance made others tremble.

His low, cool voice was filled with cruelty, and it had no difficulty pummeling Riki's pride. As far as Riki was concerned, he'd been molded out of the shit of Satan himself. Riki knew nothing about him except that he was a Tanagura Blondy. Not even his name.

Of course, if he'd been really dying to know and took the time to investigate, he'd probably be surprised to find the information easy to come by. But even now, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

And it wasn't just because he was sour about the ordeal.

Knowing more—knowing his name alone—meant that he would only fall further under the man's spell. The fact was, thinking about him even a little totally pissed him off.

The black market was bringing out the best of him, and to Riki the memory of that night was the one humiliating stain on his soul. He didn't want to think about it again. So why, when he could kick back and relax between jobs, did that keen countenance graze the edges of his thoughts? Appearing in his mind's eye as if imprinted on his brain?

The pain was almost so slight that it could be ignored, but it was a festering type of ache, and the swelling wouldn't go away. At times like those, half-unconsciously Riki would reach into the pocket of his trousers and grab hold of a key ring, grinding his molars. The object at his fingertips was the gold coin the man had tossed him when he left that day.

"Change for the hush money you forced upon me." That was what he'd told Riki. Riki thought of chucking it down the sewer, or better, getting Zach to fence it for hard cash. But for some reason he clung to it; he'd never seen anything like it before and had no idea how

much it was really worth.

Moreover, he didn't want its origins being pried into by Zach's discerning eyes. Eventually he lost the impetus to get rid of it. It'd be different if it represented the spoils of a good war fought. Why he kept this symbol of such base degradation on his person was a mystery to him.

With the courier job falling into his lap, meeting Katze, seeing with his own eyes the life the Scarface had made for himself—Riki hadn't been aware of that humiliating coin. Though now and then the thought struck him that perhaps he kept it as a caution, a reminder of the kind of ignorant brat he had been.

But even there he had the feeling he was grasping at straws. "This is so totally *fucked!*" he scolded to himself, turning the coin over in his fingers and holding it up to the light. It wasn't that unusual, except for the dazzling golden design that he never could quite get used to. *Was it supposed to be a kind of crest or seal or something?* Realizing that he was ogling it like he'd never seen it before, Riki sighed heavily.

As he did, he courier buddy Alec plopped himself down in a chair. "Hey, nice bauble you got there." He looked at Riki, his eyes hidden by his ever-present shades. "Where'd you get your hands on it?"

Alec didn't ask because he actually gave a shit about Riki's concerns. This time was simply because he was curious... or so Riki surmised from the tone of his voice, unable to read Alec's expression behind his sunglasses.

To be honest, Riki found being examined through those clouded lenses rather repulsive. He couldn't tell where Alec was looking and what he was looking at. Not to mention that his emotions were an easy read while Alec stood behind a one-way mirror. It was aggravating, him being his partner and all.

When Katze had paired him up with Alec, Riki didn't care who his partner was. The only thing that got on his nerves was the way Alec looked at him through those sunglasses. Riki could feel Alec's eyes on him but couldn't see his eyes. It bugged the hell out of him.

If he had some sort of physical deficiency and had to wear sunglasses no matter what, that was another matter. But otherwise, when meeting somebody face to face, he wanted to look that person in the eyes when he talked to him.

"Say, Alec. Do you wear those shades for looks? Or is there something wrong with your eye?"

Seeing as he'd been pulling his weight up to now, Riki believed that he should be straight about clearing up any worries and concerns the two of them might have as directly as possible.

"What are you asking me something like that for?"

"I don't like not knowing where you're looking when you've got those things on. If they're an absolute necessity then that's that, I guess. But if not, I'd like to look you in the eyes when I talk to you."

Alec didn't answer for a while. He showed a faint smile. "Did you know I was Karinese?"

"Didn't know."

"Apparently not. Or you wouldn't have blurted out such a stupid remark."

For a second Riki held his breath, wondering if he'd somehow lit the fuse on Alec's temper. At this point he couldn't call the words back, so his only option was to press forward regardless. "So you being a Karinese or whatever makes it a bad thing?"

"No. My thought is, you got some balls on you wanting to look into my eyes." Alec leaned across the table as he spoke, their noses only inches apart. "You really want to see?"

A sudden surge of curiosity overshadowed his nervousness. *Karinese eyes got some secret to them?* Alec's eyes remained hidden behind the thick pair of lenses. *Shit, you're not telling me I'm gonna turn into a stone or something*—Riki seemed to recall a story from ancient mythology to that effect.

"Quit getting all high and mighty on me and take 'em off."

Alec stopped leaning over the table and straightened his back. He sniffed through his nose in a bored fashion. "Huh. Just like a kid. In a situation like this you're supposed to get all up tight and trembling, but I was wrong to expect such feminine delights from the likes of you."

A moment passed while Riki gaped at him in stunned silence. When he couldn't take it anymore, he bellowed at his partner. "Alec!"

Alec whipped off the sunglasses. "fine, fine. Sorry to make you wait," he said with a wry grin. He fixed his gaze upon Riki.

Riki's cry of surprise caught in his throat. The vertical irises of Alec's cat-like eyes radiated a scarlet color. Red eyes. A pair of jewels inlaid with condensed drops of crimson blood. Ghil's face from the old days flashed through his mind and a tremor stabbed at his heart.

"I'm sorry, Riki. I gave it my best shot. Gave it my best shot. I'm sorry—"

As he was apt to do whenever he recalled that thin, ghostly voice, Riki opened his brimming dark eyes wide and stared at Alec. How could it be? Despite his aversion to being viewed from behind shaded eyes, he realized that he was a bit relieved Alec hid his crimson eyes behind those tinted lenses. He reminded himself that he didn't have the time to indulge in sentimental emotions that were so unlike himself.

But at this particular moment, what was really surprising Riki was how the carefree and slippery Alec—who always remained true to his glib and laid-back manner—was seriously knocked back on his heels.

"What's the big deal?"

"Isn't that—isn't that an Aurora coin?"

"Aurora?" echoed Riki, narrowing his eyes. He'd never heard the

word before.

"What—you're telling me you don't know?" Behind the sunglasses his gaze flicked back and forth from Riki's face to the coin. He was briefly struck dumb. "And now this. Un-fucking-believable." He let out an exaggerated sigh.

What's he making a big deal out of this for? Riki thought. *It's just some stupid coin, isn't it?*

"Well, it's actually the first time I've seen the real thing too, so I'm hardly in the position to be putting you down about it. Not to mention that it's a world completely unconnected to either of us."

"So what the hell is it?" Riki demanded. The insinuation Alec was making and the way he was going on about it were beginning to get on his nerves.

"An Aurora coin is a pet coin. Pet currency. In short, the money exclusively used by pets."

A long second passed during which Riki digested this information. His eyes went wide with a wordless retort. *Pet currency?* It was more than just unexpected. He felt that word—the likes of which his brain had never encountered before—ricochet around his skull like a pinball.

The World went white, like a strobe light exploding in front of his eyes. The perpetually insolent attitude plastered on his face disappeared in a flash, such that not a particle of its roguish charms remained. The expression on his face said more than any words could.

Alec stared at him flabbergasted. And then, a thought perhaps passing through his mind, a faint smile came to his lips. "That's what it's called, but because its use is so restricted—who can use it and where—it doesn't have much of an exchange value in the shopping districts. Pet coins are more commonly known as tokens."

The explanations hit him like a series of hard blows to the head. *That fucking bastard*— Riki felt the blood drain from his face. *Pet*

currency. He'd never imagined anything like that existed in the world. "So we're talking about fake money then?" Despite all his self-control, his voice sharpened to a point.

"No, it's not that."

"Then what? A coin with no exchange value? What the hell do you do with it?" he said, half enraged, glaring at Alec, the glint of danger in his eyes.

Alec shrugged. "It's not used the same as money," he said frankly. "Its value is as a kind of status symbol, proof that you're so bloody rich you can afford a pet."

Its value is as a status symbol? Riki repeated to himself in disgust. Forced against his will to recall that man's face, the embodiment of wealth and power, he unconsciously grimaced.

"For what it's worth, they're traded among fanatical collectors for the value of their designs alone. Depending on the item they can demand a pretty price."

"Yeah, by idiots," Riki spat out in a venomous tone. He couldn't begin to comprehend the concept of creating a specialty currency with no actual monetary value, simply to provide pets with "pocket change." Or of fools eager to part with real money to get their hands on them.

As if Alec were privy to Riki's inner thoughts, he explained further. "The way the system's set up, the money goes round and round and ends up right back in the hands of the rich. As they say, if you can't debauch yourself the way you want to, then you're not truly in the money."

He smirked out of the side of his mouth, "That Aurora coin you've got there is for Eos-reared pets. They hardly ever show up in circulation. Collectors kill for them. I don't know where you got you hands on one, but post that thing on an Internet auction and you'll have no shortage of interested buyers. You could make yourself a sweet bit of beer money."

"Eos—that got something to do with Tanagura?"

"You ain't kidding me. The place in Tanagura where the elites live. Palace Tower. Hey, the engraved design there is the same pattern as the Tanagura banner. And not to mention that chain looks like twenty-four carat gold. It'd light up the eyes of not just the hard-core collectors."

Alec chattered on with a great air of authority about what kind of value something like an Aurora coin might have, but not half of what he was saying reached the enraged Riki's ears. *That son of a bitch was rubbing my face in it!*

Treat a person like shit, a mere plaything, and in the end toss him a token knowing it had no value as money, calling it "change for the hush money." *How badly does a man have to fuck someone over in order to feel good about himself? Shit!* Riki boiled over with anger.

"I'm treating slum trash no different than a Tanagura pet. And you're still not happy?" Those words that had stuck to his soul, pregnant with cold, sneering laughter, flashed before his senses.

Shit!

Feeling as if he might retch, Riki pressed his trembling lips together.

Shit!!

The vulgarities rising in his throat burned his tongue. He couldn't begin to imagine the humiliation if he'd asked Zach to fence this coin.

Shit!!!

His brains all but boiled in his head. *Let me make myself clear, shithead. The next time we meet, no matter when or where, your ass is mine.* Though they were likely to meet again about the same time hell froze over.

Still, Riki couldn't help shaking his fist and bellowing in anger.

Alec had no idea what was going on. Riki had fallen silent in the middle of the conversation and then practically had a stroke right there in front of him, on the verge of bursting into an apoplectic rage.

He took a deep breath. *Easy boy, easy boy. Don't go losing it when we've got business to attend to.* He kept his counsel to himself and let his breath out slowly, wondering what had set Riki off. It was enough to give a man a migraine.

The kid had worked his way up from the slums and looked at everyone with the same hard, unsentimental gaze. It was about three months ago that Katze had put them together. At the time, Alec was sure he'd rolled snake eyes. He heaved a big sigh.

At any rate, the way he saw it, he finally had his chance, though he hadn't imagined he'd end up with this particular kid. He didn't take it seriously enough to believe that, even by accident, the responsibility would land on him.

The kind of fascists who branded Riki "sewer trash" would use the same epithets on an immigrant from the Karin star system like Alec. With their empathic abilities, Karinese were renowned as a race of healers. But because of these abilities, others feared that if touched by one of them their thoughts and intentions would be revealed.

So it wasn't just a small part of the population that viewed them with a visceral revulsion. Their crimson, cat-like irises being a dead giveaway, aside from his private life, Alec never went anywhere without his eyes concealed behind a dark pair of shades.

The reasons for disguising his identity included the simple desire to avoid the rumors that invited a lot of pointless trouble. Urban folklore like: *The red eyes of the Karinese are harbingers of bad fortune.* And: *Just by looking at you, a Karinese can drain your life energy and leave you dead.*

No matter what the secret was, it would at some point unravel and gush forth as rumor. As long as he sensed those roiling sentiments

in the looks that fell on him—to good or evil ends—Alec couldn't afford to let down his guard. Though he took a guarded stance and cynically cast the world aside, he still possessed a lingering fondness for humankind.

Regardless of the opinions of those around him, his was more than just a protective mask he wore. He rather enjoyed his reputation as an easy come, easy go kind of guy. "*Whatever will be, will be*," was his motto.

Though at least this time his sigh had the force of a gale behind it. *Why? What's the deal?* Why in the world did he have to be that kid's partner?

Knowing that there'd be no point to last-minute posturing, he'd raked his fingers through his oddly out-of-place golden copper hair, the color of a lion's mane. "Boss," he said, casually exercising his veto power, "Babysitting kids is hardly my strong point."

Predictably, Katze breezily dismissed his concerns. "Don't worry about it. He's not an ordinary brat. Time for a change from the same-old, same-old, don't you think?"

So the kid wasn't boring. But wasn't that just another way of saying he was a big troublemaker?

Alec wasn't so bored with the human condition that he exulted in prying into other people's business, but his colleagues couldn't resist tossing in their two cents worth.

"Hey, good luck."

"Hell, I know I'm resting easy tonight."

"Work his fingers to the bone, Alec."

"Don't go easy on him, he'll just get worse."

They might have been shooting their mouths off, but what they were really saying wasn't limited to Riki. They wouldn't dream of partnering up with Alec either.

Alec didn't fancy himself an aloof warrior or lone wolf, but he didn't want to carry this hand grenade around with him, either. His and Riki's disparate personalities canceled each other out, but whenever things turned for the worst, all of their worst aspects more than doubled.

Though Katze was aware of this, the decision had already been made, and he wasn't about to reverse himself at this point. Even so, Alec still reserved the right to bitch about it. Since then, he had come to admit that his initial read of the situation had been off base. Far from being a troublemaker, Riki was the veritable eye of the hurricane.

There were two kinds of couriers in the black market. According to the Midas class system they were assigned (according to blood line) to the Megisto, or were independently employed by the mercenary Athos.

Ridiculed as the "devoted dogs of the Market," the Megisto spared no pains following every order of their superiors. If told to fall on their swords they would do so without protest. In that respect, though, their lack of flexibility when things didn't go as planned was a serious drawback.

Routine, hands-on work was their forte, but having become accustomed to taking orders, they couldn't think for themselves and improvise on the spot when called for.

Athos was the exact opposite. Bound not by loyalty or fidelity but by contract only, they were full-fledged members of the Market. They came from various races and origins, and for the most part doubled their natural endowments of smarts and courage with equal measures of bravado. In other words, they were all lone wolves of one breed or another.

While they would not bare their claws to those they acknowledged as their equals, they demanded a deep and stubborn pride in their ability to do the job. Inevitably, their boss as well would test the limits of those abilities.

They knew that their boss was a slum mongrel who'd hauled himself out of the cesspool, and though curious enough by their own right, unlike the crusty and prejudiced Megisto, they didn't cast meaningless insult without justification.

They knew how capable and accomplished their boss was. There was no dissing him the way they did the likes of the Megisto. All the more reason to not give a damn when they called him a slum-bred mongrel pet behind his back.

The smart dog didn't bark in vain but only quietly sharpened his fangs. They didn't need to descend to the level of the junkyard hounds. Their abilities as "hunter" couriers who at times also took it upon themselves to scare up procurements were far superior as well. Their skills were obvious at a glance.

Consequently, that Katze would invite Riki into the fold as a member of Athos struck them all as some kind of joke. After a stunned moment of silence they exchanged glances and then with the same wry smiles shrugged their shoulders.

They knew this wasn't for show or on a whim, but nobody thought Katze would bring into the take-no-prisoners environment of the Market what was from anyone's perspective nothing but a greenhorn punk kid.

But this wasn't a negotiation. Katze had announced his decision and gave the final word on the subject. Uncertain of how to deal with the youngster, Alec and the others figured they could leave things up to their boss.

The nail that stuck up got nailed down. That was common sense. Nobody liked an overachiever, and if that overachiever happened to be a mongrel rising out of the slums, jealousy growing into a grudge was not hard to imagine.

No matter how severe the restrictions of a feudal class system, human desire itself knew no limits. Given the right motivation, loopholes could be found everywhere—people who couldn't find them had to reassure themselves by thinking they'd simply been dealt a bad hand in life.

As proof of their identity, the citizens of Midas had a biochip embedded in their earlobes soon after they were born. The word was they'd no sooner part with it than chop off their ears. A kid like Riki had no such PAM device

There was a fair amount of curiosity about the exact nature of the circumstances surrounding the youngster, but there wasn't a great desire to delve into a person's private matters. Mutual trust and money were essential to the contract, as was a certain degree of studied indifference: not seeing, not saying, and not hearing what they weren't supposed to.

The members of Athos, hired for money, were each in their own way familiar with the art of making friends as the situation demanded. Yet this young interloper showing up out of nowhere, in what had been thus far a problem-free environment, had thrown them all for a loop.

Should they go along as usual and treat him with suspicion, or just as the youngest underling to join Athos since it began? Katze didn't say to run him ragged and make good use of him. All he said was: "This is Riki. From now on he's one of us."

Even while announcing that he'd become a member, the feeling was that he wasn't here to pile up experiences as a courier. Maybe Katze had other plans for him. Starting out, a newbie's job typically revolved around deskwork. Katze didn't assign him anybody as backup, and that wasn't like him. His attitude toward Riki was: *I'm only going to tell you this once.*

Watching Riki out of the corners of their eyes, the crew had to wonder about how he ended up there. In short, the thinking was that Katze had put him on the payroll as a favor to someone. In which case he was only according Riki the treatment demanded of him.

However, with a state of mind that bordered on the arrogant, Riki shattered their expectations. To be sure, he wasn't exactly respectful to his superiors, but he wasn't an insufferable brat either.

Regardless of Katze's plans, in his own way Riki seemed determined

to learn all there was to know about the Market as quickly as possible. Taking only what he was given wasn't enough. His eyes constantly searched out the next step that would sate the desire to improve himself. The kind of pure and fearless passion that the rest of them had lost long ago, that degree of youth necessary to keep moving forward with eyes firmly fixed on the road ahead.

He had a positive yearning for learning anything he didn't know. *Far better to ask a question and be thought a fool for a moment than to stay silent and remain a fool forever.* He'd grab any passing colleague and hound him with questions.

He used everything he had at hand to learn more. The strength of his willpower was amazing. At first his colleagues found this exuberance depressing. This degree of desire made it clear he was in no way docilely hiding his time here until something better came along.

With time though, they were amazed and pleasantly surprised. He wasn't content with the status quo. He created his own future. Nobody could find fault with that kind of indomitable spirit.

Even with the odd stumble, the occasional miss, he wasn't giving up. A guy with that kind of can-do spirit was never going to run out of things to do. Whether or not a person ended up as a freeloader just going along for the ride was a decision best made, not by other people, but by the man himself.

Riki enthusiastically made the case for himself and sold it to the jury right before their very eyes.

At the time, not just Athos and Megisto but the Market as well knew where Riki had come from. But though they now looked up to Riki with new eyes, Riki hadn't changed at all. To an admirable degree, his attitude did the talking for him: *I haven't got the time to care about what these idiots think of me.*

Which didn't mean that he strictly avoided unnecessary trouble. He could as easily start a fight with a look on his face as with the words coming out of his mouth.

From Alec's perspective, accustomed as he was to the ways of the world, Riki's behavior wasn't entirely the product of childish obstinacy. But when he considered it as the nonnegotiable pride born out of the clinging webs of prejudices and discrimination that Riki had always been exposed to, then that stubbornness struck him as what he should expect of a child.

And it was nothing to laugh about. Call it stubbornness or something else, a person who possessed that sense of self was bound to thrive on adversity. A sense of conviction that did not sway with every passing breeze. In these respects, Alec sensed uncanny resemblances between Riki and Katze, who seemingly shared nothing but their roots in the slums.

However, there was no end to the assholes who couldn't shut up about it. When the more impertinent Megisto gangbangers threw down, Alec and the others couldn't help but be impressed by Riki's unexpectedly strong fighting style, that of a person who'd drawn blood quite a few times before.

The look on his face right before he threw the first punch. The way he fixed his opponent in his sights. His eyes turning up at the corners and filling with bloodlust—where did this shudder of apprehension come from?

His normally sullen, youthful aura dropped away and a completely different aspect of himself was put on display. What the hell sort of creature was this? Alec wasn't the only one swallowing hard in disbelief.

Fast.

Smart.

Supple.

Striking and dancing and closing in the for the kill. A groaning, grunting howling beast, concealing its brutal fangs, mesmerizing its foes with fear.

Jeering.

Trash-talking.

Even the sightseers who stopped to watch the show would at some point hold their breaths and fall silent. The only person who didn't appear surprised in the least was Katze.

That was when Alec started to believe that Riki hadn't come to the Market to be baby-sat as some freeloader. As the saying goes, "He that spareth the rod hateth his son." In order to fully ascertain the limits of Riki's abilities Katze had placed his bet and let the wager ride, no conditions attached.





It was even possible that Katze had plucked Riki out of the same

environment and was grooming him as his future right-hand man.

That's what starting him thinking about the talk they'd had about Riki being his partner. *So that's what this whole thing's been about?* he had to wonder. The deep sigh he'd let out was suffused with ulterior meanings.

The thought that for all Katze's apparent asceticism and self-denial, somewhere in his heart he might be searching for a kindred spirit struck him as a kind of betrayal. And thinking that way left him in an uncharacteristically melancholy state of mind that was at the same time very unlike him.

Knowing he was overstepping his position, he had to ask. "So you're asking me to strictly lay out for him the basics of being a courier and get him ready to play the first string positions?"

"No. That's not necessary. My job isn't to turn him into some kind of pro courier."

In which case his job was?

What Katze wanted was for him to pile up a wide ranges of experiences with the future in mind.

Katze wasn't about to let his diamond in the rough get fucked up by strangers before it'd been polished to a shine. Katze's expectations in this regard were as transparent as glass. Alec found himself smiling despite himself.

"So that means sticking close and keeping an eye out and making sure that nobody sets him off?"

Unable to read the irony in Alec's expression behind his dark shades, Katze didn't betray a flicker of emotion. "You needn't go that far," he said flatly and distinctly. "See, in one way or another he's a natural-born Varja."

"Varja?" Alec echoed. It was a word he wasn't familiar with.

Katze lit a second cigarette. This exacting man's one bad habit. And nobody but a Karinese like Alec would have detected the minute

amount of opium in the smoke. He wasn't an addict. And the high class of his stash notwithstanding, he didn't smoke it in front of others to show off. But Alec understood why Katze felt he had to smoke it: being a courier boss day in and day out was a tough job.

Though they were both treated as the yard dogs of the Market, the mutual hostility of Megisto and Athos had already made them something close to natural enemies. And being saddled with the double-edged sword that was Riki—was enough reason for the small indulgence.

"Originally, he was that jet-black beast out of the legend of the Veela, a magical being of exquisite beauty that hunted the souls of humans. There's supposedly no end to the people who've been thrown out of kilter and bewitched by the lustrous black pearls of his eyes."

Alec thought he caught the gist of what Katze was trying to say. "In other words, as far as the person in question is concerned, even if you don't have that sense in the slightest, there's no end to the men who would miss everything by focusing on the details. Is that what you're talking about?"

Putting it in so many words he felt he was being brutally honest, but in truth those obsidian spheres were infused with a curious and charming power. Glittering eyes that brought to mind not so much the cold silence at the edge of the abyss, but simmering black magma that engendered the desire for personal possession, even if the gleam in those eyes reflected a lust for blood.

To be honest, Alec was entranced by the rough-and-tumble as well. It didn't necessarily mean he'd come to view Riki in a whole new light, but he did feel the necessity of layering on the self-restraint and locking down the baser impulses.

"It's because the slums are a strange world distorted by the overabundance of males. Anybody who doesn't fit in has got to decide whether to stand apart or get hunted down," Katze said.

"And if neither of the above, then it's a fight to the finish?"

"Go looking for a fight and expect to get paid back with interest. To the flesh and bone. That's the law of the slums."

Alec heaved a deep sigh, thinking about how Riki's inherent toughness, an apparent mismatch with his physique, had been cultivated toward those ends. In a world where the common law was the law of the jungle, you either toughened the heart and mind or you didn't survive.

And he knew with a look at Katze that the man wasn't just talk. Sporting a countenance that could have compared with the talent of any club in Midas must be a bitter burden in life. In a world where the logic of power went unchallenged, beauty did nothing but turn a person into prey.

Whether to fight or fawn or get trampled underfoot, that was the question.

He didn't know the precise details of Katze's rise as a broker. Rumor had it that the scar on his cheek was a vestige of that past. Wearing it openly as a badge of honor and taking on the moniker of "Scarface" presented—more than his desire not to be derided as a greenhorn—a threatening stance to his surroundings.

Because Katze himself said nothing, whatever the truth might be never solidified from the clouds of rumor.

Strictly in terms of beauty, there was no shortage of prettier faces than Riki's, who was still dragging that aura of immaturity and childishness. But from Alec's perspective, Katze comparing Riki to the legendary Varja was definitely no exaggeration.

Even knowing how repugnant it was to Riki, the allure of his unkempt black hair made Alec want to touch it and see for himself. The rays radiated by his black eyes reflected a preciousness more valuable than jeweled obsidian.

The smart fluidity of his limbs was exceptional, and the severity of his temperament contrasted against his slender waist had the unintentional effect of dazzling the eyes of his more depraved comrades.

But what people found most mesmerizing was the unique feel of the whole, not the quality—good or bad—of the individual parts.

"Even with a change of location, those pheromones would be spilling out all over the place just the same. As a person with no idea what's he's scattering about, that makes him the epitome of the reluctant participant," Katze said, his voice turning bitter on the word "pheromones".

That he didn't come across as a charmer alone was reassuring. Riki got guys all worked up, regardless of orientation. Make him a woman and that kind of glamorous appeal would label him a femme fatale.

But to Riki, a stray cat raising his hackles to everybody, comparisons like that were entirely inappropriate. There was nothing special about a slum mongrel. In Riki's case, projecting that strong sense of "being there" drew people in, and to good or ill ends made their hearts ache with excitement.

For Alec as well, it was a little frightening to find himself so mercilessly drawn to desires that would never otherwise have occurred to him. Not until Riki showed up in his life had he ever experienced something like that right before his eyes.

Up to a certain point in time, the Athos gang uniformly kept Riki at arm's length, probably because they sensed the same thing and treaded carefully around him,

Everybody believed himself to be the most desirable. If they didn't have the guts and the courage to press the issue and put their self-control to the test, they'd always remain on the sidelines.

Alec wasn't the only one to come to this realization.

"Isn't it the eternal dream of you and every other man in the universe to fit a collar around the neck of a wild animal and tame the untamed beast?" Katze said, casually laying bare the distorted mentality at play.

Not unexpectedly, Alec's eyes widened momentarily in reaction.

Perhaps working as Riki's partner functioned as a kind of constraint. Though it wasn't the kind of thing in which he wished to read any deeper meanings.

"Well, the desire for control has always been more than just ambition, it's an essential quality in the human male. But as far as I'm concerned, no matter how enticing the creature, spotting a predator at a distance and knowing it bites should make you think twice about extending a hand, don't you think?"

Katze probably wasn't expecting such an innocuous response, but that was how Alec felt about the subject, especially if Katze anticipated making Riki his right-hand man in the future. In fact, had Katze been willing to take no for an answer, Alec would rather have given this whole partners business a pass.

If his previous partners could see him now, they'd no doubt lament that he'd turned into a loser who'd lost his stomach for the fight. But Alec personally sensed no dissatisfaction from his current association with Athos. As long as he had his self-respect, he believed, it didn't matter what others thought of him.

All the more reason that Alec hadn't grasped what Katze was up to.

That was when, after all was said and done, Katze said this last: "Nobody around here knows exactly how to factor Riki into the equation, but I'm not looking for him to undergo any big changes."

"And by that you mean—?" "By that I mean he's the type who masters the obstacles in front of him and takes it to the next level. If the nail sticking up gets a pounding, then so be it. But there's no need for you to take your time."

Katze's words had the effect of completely overturning the picture Alec had formed in his head up till now. He unconsciously straightened his posture. "So you're *not* training Riki with some future plans in mind?"

In response Katze twisted his cheek in something of a rare grimace. "It could be the kid's too clever for his own good. If so, then I would have wanted to see him run through the wringer too. But in Riki's

case, if that'd be enough to change who he is in a big way, then frankly the repercussions could be scary."

"What the hell kind of puzzle is he riddling me with?" Alec thought.

"So from here on out, I'm asking you to keep your hands on the reins."

Even after hauling Riki up from the depths of the slums and letting him run loose in the Market, Katze wasn't looking for him to set the world on fire right away. Basically he was asking Alec to be a counterweight to keep Riki from going over. Alec was at a loss of what to say.

So now he strode toward the cargo ship, Riki a few steps ahead of him. He stared through his sunglasses at Riki's back. Even if he wanted to take off his sunglasses in front of Riki, since that day there was no way he could. Even as an empath, even as a healer, he simply didn't possess powers that great.

Which was to say, in Alec's case, his abilities as a Karinese were rather out of the ordinary, unorthodox even. His empathic abilities did not focus on human beings but were exercised most fully by machines. And not just machines, but on the artificial intelligences typified by computers.

That was the reason why Alec was a courier who piloted cargo ships as if on a whim, and also the preeminent hacker in the Market.

That's why he was honestly taken aback that day when Riki—who didn't seem to know anything about the special gifts of the Karinese—told him to take off his sunglasses, and he didn't consider putting up a stubborn front. For Alec his sunglasses amounted to nothing more than a way of avoiding unnecessary grief.

He didn't think he was trying to cement any kind of friendship with Riki on purpose. Rather, he wanted to create a trusting relationship with his partner. Except that Riki approached the whole thing with such a humorless attitude that he couldn't repress a bit of

mischievous contrariness.

And so an empath who should have no special affinity for human emotions ended up "reading" Riki's. To the point that he found himself getting sucked into Riki's memories.

A pair of crimson eyes—

An emaciated kid—

A hospital bed—

And the words he should not be able to hear, the rasping moans quavered in his brain. The incandescent sensation of having organic sensations suddenly thrust upon his inorganic world. The pain of Riki's wide, black, unblinking eyes fixed upon him.

Alec jerked his head aside, averting his gaze, to break the entwining tendrils of Riki's gaze. He replaced his sunglasses with trembling hands, the world again fading into that eternal hue. The incessant pounding of his heart shook his whole body. He licked his chapped lips over and over, sensing the deep relief of returning to his well-accustomed, "normal" world.

An unexpected blunder. An unanticipated indiscretion. And feelings of trepidation he'd never felt before. Gathering his wits about him, he cast a glance in Riki's direction, sizing him up and checking him out.

Riki gazed absentmindedly into the sky. Not wiping at his moist eyes, there was a haunted look on his face Alec had never seen before. Tortured by strange feelings of discontent and not budging from the spot, he didn't say another word.

After that, he was conscious only of standing in front of Riki and looking at him through the lenses of his sunglasses.

Turning in the direction Katze had intended all along, albeit unexpectedly, Alec ended up carrying out his job as the "counterweight," the governor on Riki's spinning flywheel, to the fullest. His quiet groans were weighed down with derision and self-constraint.

Chapter 6

That day in Sasan (Area 8), an auction was scheduled in the Number Three underground dome.

Auctions were normally held at the convention center in Mistral Park (Area 3). This was a secret auction for those items that couldn't be handled in public. Sponsored by the black market, the auction was blanketed during the run-up by a tight security cordon twenty-four hours a day, with entry restricted to authorized personnel only.

Number five terminal, subterranean floor twenty. The holds were still and quiet. Having transported the consignment from the Delvia system to the designated H-085 cargo hanger, Riki turned his face skyward and sighed deeply.

The operation had been on schedule and going perfectly until they'd picked up the shipment at Delvia. A magnetic storm came out of nowhere, shutting down the space port for three days and slowing down the whole operation.

He and Alec had looked up at the plasma contrails twisting across the angry heavens. "You gotta be kidding me, right?"

"Son of a *bitch*!"

"Is this happening?"

"If this is some kind of joke, I'm not laughing."

They'd muttered these useless asides half in a daze. When an unforeseen loss of time was caused by one of the natural calamities common out there on the frontier and not by human error, there was no one to complain to. All they could do was wait for the weather to improve.

Consequently, the shipment arrived the day of the auction and just under the wire, barely making the auction deadline. It was not one of their prettier jobs. And if the grounds for the auction hadn't been

at Sasan, in site of the fully completed tourist airport, it was any man's guess how things might have turned out.

Riki didn't even want to imagine not getting there in time.

The stress had a lot to do with a big event like the secret auction. This kind of pressure bearing down on him was a first for Riki. Having been there and done that plenty of times before, Alec had cheerily reassured him, "At times like this there's no use trying to hurry along Mother Nature."

Doing nothing but glare out the window with growing irritation, whiling away the empty hours—that was the kind of experience he'd rather not repeat.

For the time being, he left the fine details of auditing the manifest to Alec. At the booth where the auction itself would take place, Katze was making last-minute arrangements. So Riki reported in using his videophone.

Katze could tell how exhausted Riki was. "Good work," was the first thing he said, communicating his thanks with his typical poker face. "Take a load off and enjoy yourself. Just remember that the passes I gave you don't give you access to the auction floor."

Having stated his business as far as Riki was concerned, Katze hung up, leaving no gap to sneak in a word edgewise. If anything, Riki wanted to observe this secret auction. Having that desire extinguished in short order, he muttered to himself in frustration.

What was so different from the normal auctions held at the Mistral Park? His curiosity notwithstanding, that was too much for an underling courier to hope for.

Well, tough shit for me, he decided. No need to get pissed off over it. He was sure plenty of opportunities would come his way after this. At any rate it was time to call it a day, and he felt a great sense of satisfaction at finally putting this job to bed.

Riki's still clouded expression was not the product of the unanticipated weather that had screwed up their schedules, or the

stored up stress and strain induced by the fatigue of travel. Rather, the simple job of back-and-forth transport he'd been entrusted with of late left him less than satisfied inside.

When he voiced these complaints, Alec told him, "Kid, you're ten years too young to start grouching about *that* kind of shit. The lackeys complain about everything all the time. It's the law of the universe."

Alec quickly cut him down, but Riki still wanted out of the frontier transport rotation. The ships stopped at ports of call along fixed routes, took on cargo, and transported it. It was routine work that even the Megisto could handle.

Getting stuck on the frontier circuit was enough to make Riki wonder if he'd screwed up somewhere along the line. Thanks to this job, he and Guy were growing further and further apart by the day.

Having known nothing but the stale, stifling air of the slums, the excitement and stimulation of riding cargo ships through galactic space was beyond anything he could have imagined. Visiting planets he'd never heard about, meeting an infinite variety of people, hearing unfamiliar languages, the ports of call always brimming with the strange and the unexpected.

But that giddy sense of adventure passed pretty quickly. "What, you got no adolescent charm left in you? You some kind of kick-ass big shot? Don't you know that newbies are supposed to get themselves worked up over the thrill of it all, to the point where they can't concentrate on their work?"

But with amazing speed, Riki got used to the routine and wanted more.

His life had been turned upside down, and it was just like when he was brought to Guardian, except that his age, his ready state of mind, and the consciousness of his goals were completely different. Perhaps that was why each accomplished objective left him lusting after.

That which had constrained and restrained him had fallen away. Or

else the desire not to fritter away his time had become that much stronger.

"Your eyes are bigger than your mouth, boy. Try to eat the whole cake at once, and you're gonna regret it. Easy does it. Take it as it comes, that's what's important." He spoke with an earnest intensity. "Because the time's coming, no matter how much you may not like it, when you're gonna have to run as fast as you can. And when it does that kind of thing won't do you no damned good at all."

Riki understood what Alec was trying to tell him. Right now keeping his temper under check and piling up experience took priority. But he wanted transport jobs that involved more than eating up the hours moving stuff from point A to point B.

It wasn't like he was pining for the nerve-wracking, hot-wired days of Bison, but that era had soaked into his skin and was throbbing away somewhere inside him. He was thinking about it long and hard when he got a hard slap on the back.

"Riki, thanks for waiting. It's way late but let's grab a bite to eat."

As if suddenly awakened from a slumber, Riki's stomach growled in response. Come to think about it, they'd been so pressed for time since arriving at the airport and getting here that he hadn't even grabbed something to eat out of a vending machine.

No matter what, they had to make the delivery on time. With nothing else on his mind, tensed up to the breaking point, he hadn't even noticed his stomach. But now that he noticed his empty stomach, he realized as well how tired he was.

Alec was in the same straights. "Yeah, that sprint from the gate was a ball-breaker," the normally happy-go-lucky Alec said. This time alone the strain was beginning to show.

When everything was said and done, the fatigue was far more mental than physical. They climbed onto the now-empty forklift. Without a word between them Alec trundled toward the freight elevators that served the premises.

God, I'm going to fill my gut and then sleep for a week. But having made it this far, heading all the way back to the slums and crashing on Guy's bed struck him as one big pain in the ass. Riki languidly stretched out his arms and legs, leaned way back, and let his mind and gaze drift.

The silhouette of a man flashed by in corners of his eyes.

He suddenly snapped to attention, focusing his eyes. He'd thought they were the last ones to leave and nobody else was around. But that didn't seem to be the case.

Three men. *Huh*, thought Riki. So he and Alec weren't the only couriers scrambling to make their deliveries in time.

Or not.

A snazzy flatbed was sitting in front of door H-010. It wasn't the same kind of service forklift that he and Alec were using. Considering the vehicle, it seemed a reasonable assumption that these guys were somehow related to the cargo *owners*, not the delivery boys.

And no doubt that tall guy there is the leader.

He was clad in a dark blue suit that even from a distance looked convincingly custom-made, likely the dress-up style for the auction that was about to start. Even from behind, his trim and cut and well-balanced figure was more than sufficient to impart a particular sense of authority.

The people with the goods, who stood out in a crowd, could be spotted anywhere. Needless to say, it was a rare man among men whose back alone broadcast the fact. To good or evil ends, a different quality than being the media darling of the age.

The "chosen man" really existed. Being a courier had blessed Riki with many opportunities to observe all types of people. He had learned by now that such "chosen men" were not media inventions.

True to his expectations, the other two men bowed deeply to him.

Hoh. Definitely an important guy. He had to be the owner himself. And his coming all the way down here like this must mean it was some pretty pricey merchandise.

Having completed whatever business he'd come here for, the tall man turned around.

In that instant—

Riki's exhausted and famished body stiffened as if struck by an electric wire.

No fucking way—

His eyes shot open in utter amazement, focusing like a laser on the face of the man climbing onto the flatbed. After all these months. The face he couldn't forget even if he tried was right there in front of him. His hair was cut short and dyed an ubiquitous brown, but there was no mistaking the coldly beautiful countenance the emerged from beneath the cobalt blue eyeshades.

Why? Why here?

The whys aside, the inarticulate, burning shock gathered within the core of his being and pounded against the back of his throat. *That son of a bitch!* Biting back the words between clenched teeth he reached out and grabbed Alec's arm.

"What?"

"Stop!"

"Eh?"

"Stop this thing. I gotta do something."

"Something you have to do?" Alec fur-rowed his brows as Riki jumped off the forklift before Alec could bring it to a halt.

"Hey Riki!" Alec called out with an unintentionally loud voice.

But Riki raced on ahead, showing no signs of turning back or

stopping. He couldn't have stopped himself even if he wanted to. He ran with his eyes fixed firmly ahead of him so as not to lose sight of the small flatbed that was now some distance away. The matter of what he would do once he caught up with it had not entered his brain. Every thought was instead directed to moving his body forward.

And yet he still didn't know the man's name. Only that he'd abused him to his heart's content and in the end had tossed him "pet money" for the privilege, a vicious slap across the face. Riki had no other option left to him but pursuit.

But if the reasons were tortured out of him, he might also want to know why a Tanagura Blondy would go to the trouble of concealing his identity in order to attend a black market auction. And where the hell was he going?

The flatbed turned right and then left at the corner, following a route completely different from that to the loading bays. It stopped in front of a set of doors at an exit Riki didn't know about.

The man climbed down from the flatbed, retrieved a cardkey from his breast pocket, and swiped it through the slot. He passed through the door without a hitch and disappeared inside.

Riki muttered in frustration. He lunged toward the door with no idea whether his cardkey would work on this high-grade security system. It wouldn't be kid's play, that was for certain. And if the door happened to have an alarm? And if he got detained in the process? And if after all the effort he'd gone to he ended up losing this job as a consequence?

But he could just stand there doing nothing. With all the resolution he could muster, Riki shoved his cardkey into the slot.

The door opened so readily Riki had to laugh at his own anxieties. Still, it wasn't opening fast enough, so he ducked down under the door. At this rate he worried the man might well be long gone. Luckily, the passage on the other side of the door proved to travel on straight for some ways.

Catching sight of the man's now-familiar back, he spontaneously breathed a sigh of relief. The man continued on with limber, graceful steps. Riki quickened his pace so as to keep him in his sights.

However, his senses focused only on the retreating figure of the man, Riki didn't noticed the color of the floor gradually changing beneath his feet, or the quietly descending shutter doors closing off the road behind him, or the walls stealthily opening on either side to create completely different passageways.

He walked on for how much longer he couldn't quite say. With unhurried steps the man turned right at the corner and all but vanished into thin air.

"Eh?" Dumbfounded, the abrupt sense of loss rooted Riki briefly to the spot. *Where the hell did he go?* He felt as if a tightly wound rubber band had suddenly broken and snapped back on his fingers.

Thankfully, he didn't have to jerk around looking for something that wasn't there. Right there at the end of his gaze was a single door, heavy black and apparently fashioned out of steel.

Riki stared at it, unblinking.

There was no other place the man could have gone. Yet Riki couldn't take the next step. The strange presence of the steel door notwithstanding, that wasn't what was checking his forward progress. It was as if something or someone—a friend or acquaintance—grabbed hold of his arm and shouted: *Don't go there!*

Back in the slums when he was leading Bison he'd had that sensation any number of times. A kind a premonition he couldn't quite put a finger on. Not quite a flash of insight. Not a signpost pointing him in the right direction either. And neither did he feel it all the time. It came unpredictably, out of nowhere.

At times like this, that hand reached out to grab his arm. At other times it was only an electric sensation on the back of his neck. It wasn't the kind of thing he could put into words. The kind of thing he hadn't even told Guy about. The kind of knowledge he wasn't

even sure he'd been in possession of all along, certainly not from birth.

But still Riki knew that there was more to the world than what he could see with his own two eyes. During his years at Guardian, there was a kid on his same block a year younger than him. Autistic, his sickly constitution burdened with physical ailments, he looked much younger than his age in years.

Which may have been why he seemed able to see things that couldn't be seen, and hear things that the other children couldn't hear,

The adult "mothers" said that his illnesses triggered the hallucinations he saw and heard. But those explanations weren't enough, certainly not enough to deal with the strange experiences that Riki had come to know first-hand.

Reality and delusion and paths to heaven. The spaces between hallucination and bedazzlement. The uncertainties of everyday life. Time and timelessness.

And the indelible pain.

In retrospect, it was possible that Aire—his talisman and protector, who had not left him for an instant—had the "sight" as well.

So perhaps there was something in the water or in the air at Guardian, that only so-called garden in the slums. Guardian angels or demons from hell, Riki would be hard pressed to say which. He'd become aware of these feelings ever since a certain incident he was involved in, but even that might be nothing more than another delusion.

A switch had been thrown in his brain, and a door wrenched open. When he tried to articulate all this, Guy would fret and mother him to the point of smothering him, and so Riki figured it was best to bite his tongue. After leaving Guardian for the slums, and even after becoming a courier, he'd never once gone against what this intuition had told him.

Nevertheless, Riki stared at that door, as if to finally shake free of that weakness and passivity for the first time. He'd come this far and now was no time to hesitate. The longer he debated with himself, the farther the man moved away from him.

But would the door actually open, just like that? The door's old and familiar make aroused his suspicions. High overhead a two-headed snake, its head raised, peered down at him. A golden snake with eyes like large rubies.

On top of that, the door had a single doorknob but no slot for a cardkey. He could help thinking that perhaps the door used a higher-tech visual recognition system and the golden snake was part of that system. *Is that snake going to zap me with a laser?* Perhaps that was the source of the disagreeable sensation he'd been feeling for the past few minutes.

But upon final analysis, his curiosity surmounted his anxieties. Personal determination won. If he retreated now, he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

Withdraw and live with that failure, or plunge on ahead and mourn the day at a later time. If he was left to wish otherwise no matter which path he chose, then no matter what the result, it would be better to regret the charge into battle than to regret a retreat from the field.

Riki took a deep breath. With all the resolution in his body he grabbed the knob, twisted, and pulled.

In that moment, the memory of the night when he'd first met that man abruptly sparked across his brain. That night, Riki had stepped through the door at Minos full of reckless arrogance. Just like he was doing now.

And his pride had received the thrashing of its life.

So what gamble was he taking now? The doubts that flashed through his thoughts vanished like froth on the water the moment he stepped across the threshold.

Inside was a strangely blue-tinged darkness. No heavens and no earth. A silent blue world as far as the eye could see. Missing even the twinkling of stars, more than a night sky, it seemed to him some strange dimension in space suffused with an unbearable loneliness.

What the hell is this place? For a long minute Riki stood rooted there, his mind drifting away from him.

He couldn't see that tall man anywhere. Had he even come this way? At that moment, something seemed to leap into his peripheral vision. With a gasp Riki came back to his senses. When he shot a quick look in that direction there was not even a ripple left behind in the blue expanse of silence.

"Am I imagining things—?" he asked himself with a sharp intake of breath. He couldn't help being aware of his rising heartbeat. *"I don't seem to be."*

Maybe these were the lingering effects of that sensation he'd been feeling the past few minutes. With every intent of barreling in here, he'd come this far and pulled up with a case of the jitters. He smiled to himself in self-derision. *What am I so nervous about? That asshole is no doubt still running rings around me.*

Shaking his head as if to cast off the clinging sense of discomfort, he looked down at his feet. Standing there as if on the shores of a broad, dark blue sea, he felt his eyes freeze on the spot. A strange presence peered up at him.

Whatever it was, its gaze bore into Riki, passing through him. It was not so much that the pupils had vanished from its eyes—more like a dull golden light poured from its eye sockets.

This wasn't an illusion. Riki couldn't be sure just *what* he was seeing, but the golden eyes definitely had *him* in their sights. Riki's heartbeat began to drum inside his chest. He couldn't avert his gaze, as if their eyes had entwined and rooted to the spot.

There was no wind, but his dark green hair wavered in slow undulations. The whiteness of his skin bled into his surroundings like a glowing halo. There was a bluish, electric white light that

covered his whole body like silver scales. Riki at last realized that the entire room was a giant aquarium.

And this person who was not-quite-a-person was inside it. A half human, half fish chimera. At his feet was the rousing and legendary mermaid. The mouth divided its face from ear to ear, and held razor-sharp teeth. The three-pronged claws extending from the ends of its fins lent to the highly grotesque appearance that Riki found difficult to stomach.



No words came to his quivering lips. Frozen awkwardly in place, his

feet began to tremble. Cold sweat coursed from his forehead. His palms grew damp. Riki finally broke free of the stifling, choking chains and pitched forward at a run.

But no matter how hard he looked he couldn't find the exit. *Shit!* This couldn't be happening. *What the fuck is going on?*

The merciless throbbing at his temples was the beating of his own heart. Riki's lips paled as his face drained of color. Rushing helter-skelter, the half-man pursued him over the transparent wall like a predator going after game.

Coming to the realization that the door he'd come in through had at some point vanished, a cold shock stabbed Riki to the core of his being. He froze there in blank amazement.

Low, muffled laughter echoed seemingly out of nowhere. Riki barely suppressed the scream that came to his throat as an icy hand tightened around his heart. The lower half of his body began to spasm.

The steady sound of footsteps came closer and closer, approaching to the rhythm of his pounding heart, as if to trample him underfoot. As it came closer, the tension closing around his throat, that thing disturbing the blue darkness unexpectedly flashed its cold and charming smile in Riki's wide eyes.

Riki was too startled to mouth an articulate response, but for reasons he didn't understand, he did feel relieved. These two enmeshed emotions jolting his thoughts back and forth, Riki swallowed the wordless cry that came to his lips.

In the next moment, his legs folded beneath him.

Taking this physical reaction as a kind of signal, the room filled with soft light, which triggered a response in the creature pursuing him as well. It turned away and ran, vanishing out of sight in the blink of an eye.

"Can I lend you a hand?" asked a smooth, cool voice Riki couldn't forget even if he wanted to. He spoke in a manner that suggested he

was stifling laughter, and to Riki's venomous eyes once again the man's throat was clearly trembling with humor. "Oh, yes. You dislike being in another's debt."

Fucking son of a bitch!

Grating his back teeth together, choking back the bile, Riki got on all fours and went to stand up.

Shit—!

At a time like this, being forced into such a humiliating posture in front of this man. His throat burned. The sheer awkwardness of his stance was embarrassing enough, but he somehow couldn't muster the energy to stand. Even if he could manage to get his feet under him, his knees wouldn't stop shaking.

"What an unexpected encounter this is. I never would have expected to meet you here." He spoke bluntly and without adornment, smiling coldly out of one side of his mouth. "What's the matter? So excited to see me after such a long time you can't find the words?"

"What—the—fuck—was—*that*—?"

Having come this far, he was going to swallow his pride and tough it out. This man had already seen everything—every ounce of shame and ridicule and mortification and weakness. So it was time to make a virtue of necessity and leave the squaring of accounts to later.

"An experimental prototype. Getting the improved version ready for military use is going to take some time."

"Sounds lovely, but you think you can get away with that if I leak it to the Commonwealth big shots? I bet they'd have something to say about it."

Confronted with such bravado the man barely batted an eyelash. "My, my, you pick yourself up pretty quickly. I wasn't expecting that sort of response from a man about to piss himself."

His words were as good as a contemptuous slap across the face. The

humiliation only focused Riki's gaze and he responded with a sharp glare.

"Don't give me those unruly eyes of yours. They make me want to hear you cry out again."

The man's cold smile grew colder. Recalling how he'd been toyed with and disgraced made Riki's soul burn. It was different this time, though—and to different ends.

"And you're the same little brat."

"Where's the exit?"

"There is no exit."

Riki's eyes flew open wide with surprises. In a single stroke the one-sided torment he'd suffered that night at Minos and all the melancholy it engendered sparked back to life. He managed to keep the roiling anger and resentment in check. Losing it here and now would only give the man more ammunition to use against him.

"I didn't come here to shoot the shit with you. Where's the damned exit?"

"Threatening me won't change the situation, Riki."

The suggestive manner in which the man spoke his name made Riki catch his breath. *How the hell does he know my name?*

Seeing to the heart of Riki's confusion, the man added in a quiet voice, "Didn't Katze warn you about being too curious?"

Katze? A splash of ice water doused his rising anger. What was going on? What was this about? Why should he be hearing Katze's name from this man's lips as well?

"All the more fortunate for him that we came to an accommodation without things becoming uglier than necessary."

Riki stared incomprehensively. It had never dawned on him that the scar on Katze's cheek could somehow be connected to this man.

"For a slum mongrel he wasn't stupid. He showed me a moderately good time. Though, I had better uses for him than as a medical experiment. How about yourself?" A chord of unrestrained cruelty underscored his arrogant tone of voice.

"Who the hell are you?" Riki realized his lips were trembling.

"Jason Mink. A mere Blondy grasping that brass ring forever out of the reach of the common man."

He's gotta be lying! Riki choked back the urge to scream. He slowly backed away. He's a *what*? He's who? A *mere* Blondy? This couldn't mean anything but trouble for Riki.

He retreated a step. And another.

The third never came.

Jason caught him by the arm and yanked Riki to him. Not just his face but Riki's whole body stiffened with shock. Jason seized his jaw and turned it toward him.

"You've changed since the last time we met." Jason fixed his gaze on him. "They say you're known around the Market as 'Riki the Black.' The old wounds must be so unbearable when he looks at you. No wonder Katze was such a pushover."

As Riki turned these words over in his mind, he was rendered speechless. To a mongrel gasping for breath in the suffocating, oppressive atmosphere of the slums, a courier job falling from heaven was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

But what if it didn't turn out this way because of luck? What if there had been a reason for it? Riki felt the cold tendrils of dread on his back, considering the possibility that Katze had set him up all along.

But what the hell *for*? What did a broker who'd risen from the slums and a Tanagura Blondy have to do with each other? He couldn't figure it out, no matter how hard he thought.

They had laid some trap. But *why*? He was always asking for

trouble, and he usually got it, so he figured that was fair. But now this? What was this all about? Something was going on. Something he didn't realize—

When he thought about it in these terms, his rage boiled over. He felt as if everything that had made his life livable was crumbling away. For a second, the world before his eyes went pitch black.

"What are you gonna do with me?"

"What do you want me to do with you?" Iason laughed into Riki's wide eyes.

At that point Riki couldn't ignore the cold chill crawling up his spine.

Chapter 7

Riki had no idea where he was.

Except that he was in a windowless room, surrounded by four ivory walls. A simple bed. A chair and table. Nothing else. The one door, the only way out, was locked from the outside.

He knocked on the door. He even kicked it. It didn't move.

The room was a neat and tidy jail cell. Apparently, he'd been dragged here from that place that reminded him of the deep, blue ocean. The last thing he remembered was throwing a punch at Iason. He'd known it was a dumb move.

Iason gave him a hard blow to the gut in return, and it was lights out.

When he came to, he was lying on the aforementioned bed, thoroughly beat. His pockets had been emptied, including cash, the ID card Katze had given him, and the coin attached to its key chain. Even the butterfly knife he kept tucked in his boots in case of emergency was gone. Everything.

Having been stripped of all his possessions and tossed in this cell, Riki was in no mood to settle down. Far from it. His mind was spinning: *What the fuck was that asshole thinking?* What exactly was he planning on doing, locking him up in here without a word?

Riki knew he should be thinking about other things, but to start with, he didn't have a clue what the other things on that list should be.

Shit!

Grinding his back teeth together Riki slammed his foot against the chair with all his might and sent it flying.

Sasan (Area 8). The Number Three tower dome. The secret auction had ended without any problems and in a style befitting a king. Iason Mink was not basking in the afterglow, but as always he was relaxing with his usual grace and authority in his penthouse office.

He leaned back, all but engulfed by the sofa, crossed his long legs, and looked at the panel display on the wall. On the display was a video feed of Riki, twisting his lips in obvious irritation. Iason adjusted a control on the remote and in a flash the screen was filled with a close-up of Riki's face.

Despite its unkempt, disheveled appearance, his black hair glistened softly. His bangs couldn't hide the peevishness in his obsidian eyes. His ill humor tightly pinched the corners of his eyes, replete with his rough and vulgar emotions.

Iason almost imagined he could hear the sound of the teeth grinding in vexation escaping the thin, grim line of his lips. There before him was a filthy alley cat. No manners, no class, and not an ounce of discipline and control. Regardless, the life of this untainted, uncivilized "noble savage" shone with a remarkable brightness.

When they had met beneath the garish neon glow of the double rings of Midas, he'd been no more than a proud, ignorant, shit-faced little kid with no outlet for his unconstrained emotions. He hadn't a clue how to ingratiate himself with others. No social skill beyond baring his teeth and growling like a dog.

A slum mongrel.

His decision at the time to turn a blind eye and not turn him over to the police came down to pure whimsy. But accompanying him to a place that's purpose was obvious at a glance, and then acting on the desire to knock this kid down a bit—after bringing him to a degree of arousal he'd never seen before, of course—was nothing more than following the whim and letting nature take its course.

The kid had been contrary for the sheer sake of contrariness, yet with no strategy or forethought in mind, and with so much pride on display, he could not permit himself to avert his gaze from a man

he must have known was a Blondy.

So Iason had used him up and thrown him away. Tossing him the Aurora Coin on the way out was nothing more than a spur-of-the-moment thing. As entertaining diversions went, this one had more meat on the bones than most, but in the end he was still a diversion. As "change" for the hush money forced upon him, the pet currency struck him as appropriate.

Pet currency consisted of metal tokens that were worthless in the retail markets, but an Aurora Coin had far more value than that of mere money. Just one Aurora Coin could be converted for more cash than all the kid's small time stolen cash cards.

Iason remained a tad curious whether a slum mongrel would appreciate real value when it fell into his hands. So he told Katze to keep his eyes open and let him know as soon as that coin emerged from the slums.

He was sure it'd be a matter of days. But the time stretched on and on. Iason was disappointed, and all the more intrigued as to why this unknown slum mongrel had not cashed in his prize.

At the same time, what had become of this punk after Iason ground his pride into the mud?

In regards to the coin, Katze followed his instructions without a word of objection. At the same time, he signaled his disapproval with Iason having at his disposal a fellow brother from the slums, and one still green behind the ears at that.

Naturally, whatever arguments Katze had, Iason wasn't inclined in the least to back down. Whether the kid would prove useful to him or not wasn't up for debate as far as Iason was concerned. He was the product of simple curiosity.

"Riki the Black," eh? If fed properly perhaps this mangy alley cat could become a tiger.

Over these past few months, he'd undergone quite the transformation. Those changes were not simply on the surface, but

undoubtedly a reflection of the balance between good and bad aspects of his personal character.

But it was still not enough. The satisfaction of his curiosity may well have prompted such thoughts.

He switched the remote again. Just as he would have predicted, Riki was kicking the hell out of the chair. Iason smiled despite himself. *That's a mongrel badly in need of some training.*

"Iason—" Behind him another voice suddenly broke into his thoughts. "Are you serious about this?" There stood Raoul Hamm, his handsome, untamed countenance showing an unusually somber cast for a Tanagura elite. "You didn't really lay hands on that piece of gutter trash, did you? Bringing a male that hasn't even been housebroken to Eos is simply asking for trouble."

"True, but that boundless pride is such an improvement over those brainless sex dolls. What do you make of that sullen angst? He's so vulgar and coarse. You don't think he would be worth training? It'd be fun to raise a different sort of pet for a change."

"What manner of things you choose to raise is your own business, but making such a creature into a pet is not going to reflect well on the name of Iason Mink."

"I wonder. I have to believe that with the proper training he could turn into a most interesting pet, though—"

"How much self-confidence you may have is beside the point. What if he can't be housebroken?"

"If and when that time comes, we can always muddle with his brain, turn him into a sex doll, and dispose of him in the black market. Let it be known that this pet was once the property of Iason Mink and that by itself would up the price significantly. Or perhaps we can keep him around for use of the guests, penned up until he expires of his own accord? There must be dozens of other uses we could think of."

With that blithe pronouncement Iason turned his attention back to

the screen.

Make a slum mongrel into a pet.

It never once occurred to him that this plan, hardly more than a sheer act of whimsy, would shake his pride as a Blondy to the core.

Coda

A Tanagura Blondy and a slum mongrel. An insurmountable divide.

Their encounter: perhaps an inconceivable freak accident, perhaps an unforeseen twist or quirk of thought.

Sentiments so scalding and so deep as to numb the heart. And pregnant with a touch of madness. Resembling a weapon of love.

So many thoughts tearing asunder so many souls, and then turning to face the apocalypse—

(Excerpted from the *Sense of Crisis* soundtrack liner notes.)

AI NO KUSABI
THE SPACE BETWEEN

Vol.3

Nightmare

Summer 2008

Afterword

Hello there.

For the past year it's been one thing after another without a break. "The manuscript?" I say with a laugh, "Good and properly late." But this is not the sort of situation I can afford to take lightly. I must apologize effusively to all parties concerned for inflicting all manner of inconveniences on them.

Yet these are the holes I'm perpetually digging for myself. Now, take a deep breath—

At any rate, managing to make it to the afterword without incident (wishful thinking, I'm sure), I heave a big sigh of relief. Well, no. Rather, when it comes to that, my schedule hereafter is packed to the gills. It's enough to make a grown woman cry.

Life can be called a drama without a plot, meaning that anything and everything can be counted upon *not* to turn out as planned. And boy don't I know it.

Well, then... enough of the whining and complaining.

I do hope you've enjoyed "Destiny," the second volume of *Ai no Kusabi*. As I often do, the original title in Japanese is an invented kanji compound. Fate conspires to bring about an unexpected meeting and the wheels of karma begin to move. Hence the title "Destiny," defined by the kanji for "life" (the root kanji of both "fate" and "karma") and the kanji for "movement."

The unexpected encounter that defined my own karma was of course the day I crossed paths with *June Magazine*. If the issue sporting a cover illustration by Keiko Takemiya hadn't come into my possession that day at the bookstore, the Reiko Yoshihara I am today wouldn't exist. No, really.

Recently at a *June* editorial meeting (this year makes it a quarter century; my how time flies!), I was pleased to share a few words with Koo Akizuki, and was able to again confirm that the memory

of that first, indelible meeting with *June* will never fade, no matter how many years pass, something even I find surprising.

And with the founding editor of *June* joining in, it turned into a delightful conversation.

"Is that really true?" she asked.

"I swear. It's true."

I'd swear as well that I find myself getting into these kinds of conversations all over the place.

When it comes to this minor but lively genre, it seems that people are either fanatics who know it backward and forward, or don't even know it exists. It's gone from a being a "*June* thing" to an "*aestheticism* thing" to a "*yaoi* thing." Of course, I deeply believe that the starting point for me was all the passion and affection I had back when it was a *June* thing.

On the other hand, immersed in those streams—well, maybe that's not the right word—immersed in those torrential outpourings of imagination and desire, it might have been already too late by that point to extricate myself.

Even though my passions have changed somewhat since *Ai no Kusabi* was first syndicated in *June*, putting pen to paper in this manner to revise and update the book edition has proved in many respects a deeply satisfying experience.

I apologize for my pace of work, which could be compared to the stride of a turtle in its sluggish tempo, so I'm delighted that everyone is taking it so well and has kept the relationship going with such patience and forbearance.

The next time we meet will probably be in the form of drama CD based on a certain series from Kadokawa (mail order only). This one's been in the works for a while as well, so those of you who are interested in the project should by all means take a listen.

Lastly, my thanks as always to Katsumi Michihara for her beautiful illustrations. Sorry, Katsumi, for all the procrastination and delays.

See you next time!

Rieko Yoshihara

April 2003